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GUY DE MAUPASSANT

MISS HARRIET
AND OTHER STORIES

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
T. E. G R A H A M



SUSIL GUPTA
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AND OTHER STORIES

C O N T E N T S

<i>Miss Harriet</i>	page	7
<i>The Inheritance</i>	33
<i>Denis</i>	125
<i>The Donkey</i>	...	...	...	135
<i>Idyll</i>	...	...	...	148
<i>The Piece Of String</i>	...	...	...	155
<i>Waiter, a Beer!</i>	...	...	...	165
<i>The Christening</i>	...	...	...	174
<i>Regret</i>	...	...	...	181
<i>My Uncle Jules</i>	...	...	...	189
<i>In The Train</i>	...	...	...	200
<i>The Mother Savage</i>	...	...	...	208

MISS HARRIET

To Madame . . .

WE were seven in the break, four women and three men, one of the latter on the box next to the driver, and, with the horses at a walking-pace, we were climbing the steep hill where the road wound like a serpent.

Having set out from Etretat at dawn, to go and visit the ruins of Tancarville, we were still drowsy, our senses deadened in the fresh morning air. The women in particular, little accustomed to these early risings of sportsmen, let their eyelids drop again at every moment, lolled their heads or else yawned, insensible to the stir of the rising day.

It was Autumn. On both sides of the road stretched the denuded fields, yellowed by the short stalks of the mown oats and wheat, which covered the soil like an ill-shaven beard. The misty earth seemed to steam. Larks sang in the air, other birds chirped in the bushes.

The sun at last rose before us, all red on the brink of the horizon ; and, as it gradually climbed, brighter every minute, the countryside seemed to wake up, smile, shake herself, and, like a woman getting out of bed, take off her night-dress of white mist.

The Comte d'Etraille, sitting on the coachman's box, cried : "Look, a hare!" and he extended his arm to the left, pointing to a patch of clover. The animal was running along, almost hidden by this cover showing only its big ears : then it scampered away over a ploughed field, stopped, set off again at a mad race, changed direction, stopped again, uneasy, on the watch for any danger, undecided which way to take ; then it began to run again with great bounds of its hindquarters, and it disappeared into a large bed of beetroot. All the men woke up, following the animal's course.

René Lemoanoir declared : "We are not very gallant this morning" and, looking at his neighbour, the little Baronne de Sérennes, who was fighting against sleep, he said to her in a low voice : "You are thinking of your husband, Baronne. Put your mind at rest, he won't be back until Saturday. You still have four days."

She replied with a sleepy smile : "How silly you are!" Then, shaking off her torpor, she added : "Now then, tell us something to make us laugh. You, Monsieur Chenal, who are supposed to have had more intrigues than the Duc de Richelieu, tell us the story of one of your love-affairs, whichever one you like."

Léon Chenal, an old painter who had been very handsome, very strong, very proud of his appearance, and much loved, took his long white beard in his hand and smiled, then, after some moments' reflection, he suddenly became grave.

"This will not be gay, Mesdames ; I am going to tell you of the saddest love in my life. I wish my friends may never inspire one like it."

I

I was then twenty-five years old and I was playing the young painter along the Normandy coast.

I call "playing the young painter," that roaming from inn to inn, haversack on back, on the pretext of studies and landscapes from nature. I know nothing better than this random, wandering life. One is free, without fetters of any kind, without worries or pre-occupations, without even a thought for the morrow. One goes by the road one likes, with no other guide but one's fancy, with no other counsellor but the pleasure of one's eyes. You stop because a stream has charmed you, because the smell of the fried potatoes in front of an inn-keeper's door seems good to you. Sometimes it is the scent of clematis that has decided your choice, or the naïve wink of an inn-girl. Do not despise these rustic affections. They have a soul and senses too, these girls, and firm cheeks and fresh lips; and their violent kiss is strong and savoury like a wild fruit. Love is always precious, wherever it comes from. A heart that beats when you appear, an eye that weeps when you leave, are things so rare, so sweet, so precious, that one must never despise them.

I have known rendezvous in ditches full of prim-roses, behind the shed where the cows sleep, and on the straw of lofts still warm from the heat of the day. I have memories of coarse, grey cloth on rough, resilient flesh, and regrets for naïve and frank caresses, more delicate in their sincere brutality, than the subtle pleasures gained from charming and distinguished women.

But what one loves above all in these random jour-

neyings, are the fields, the woods, the sun-risings, the twilights, the moonlit nights. To painters they are honeymoon-trips with the earth. One is alone, right close to her, in this long, peaceful rendezvous. One lies down in a meadow, in the midst of the daisies and the poppies, and with open eyes, in a bright stream of sunshine, one gazes at the little village in the distance with its pointed belfry ringing the midday.

One sits down by the edge of a spring, gushing at the foot of an oak, in the midst of a cluster of frail, tall grasses, glistening with life. One kneels down, one bends over, one drinks that cold, transparent water, which wets one's moustache and nose, one drinks it with physical pleasure, as if one were kissing the spring, lip to lip. Sometimes, when one comes across a deep part along these narrow streams, one plunges into it, quite naked, and one feels on one's skin, from head to foot, a sort of icy and delicious caress, the trembling of the current, alive and fleet.

One is gay on the hills, melancholy by the brink of the pools, exalted when the sun is drowned in an ocean of blood-coloured clouds and casts red reflections on the waters. And, in the evening, under the moon that is passing over the backcloth of the sky, one thinks of a thousand strange things which would never come to mind in the burning brightness of day.

Well, while roaming thus through this very district where we are this year, I arrived one evening at the little village of Benouville, on the cliffs, between Yport and Etretat. I had come from Fécamp, along the coast, that lofty coast, up-

right like a wall, with projections of chalky rocks falling perpendicularly to the sea. I had been walking since the morning on that close-cropped turf, fine and yielding like a carpet, which grows on the edge of the abyss in the salty wind of the open sea. And, singing with full throat, walking with long strides, now watching the slow and rounded flight of a seagull, parading the white curve of its wings against the blue sky, now gazing at the brown sail of a fishing-boat on the green sea, I had passed a happy, carefree day.

I was shown a little farm where they took in travellers, a sort of inn, kept by a peasant-woman, in the middle of a Norman courtyard surrounded by a double row of beech-trees.

So, leaving the cliffs, I arrived at the hamlet enclosed by these great trees, and I introduced myself to Mother Lecacheur.

She was an old country-woman, wrinkled and severe, who always seemed to receive customers against her will, with a sort of distrust.

It was May ; the apple-trees, in full bloom, covered the courtyard with a roof of scented flowers, and sprinkled an incessant, whirling rain of pink petals which fell endlessly both on people and on to the grass.

I asked : "Well, Madame Lecacheur, have you a room for me?"

Astonished that I knew her name, she replied : "That depends, everything is taken. Still, we can see all the same."

In five minutes we had come to an agreement, and I laid my haversack down on the earthen floor of a rustic room. furnished with a bed. two chairs. a table

and a basin. It opened into the big, smoky kitchen, where the boarders took their meals with the people of the farm and the landlady, who was a widow.

I washed my hands and emerged again. The old woman was making a chicken *fricassée* for dinner, in her large fire-place, where the pot-hook hung, black with smoke.

“You have people staying with you then, at the moment?” I said to her.

She replied, with her discontented air: “I’ve a lady, an elderly Englishwoman. She has the other bedroom.”

By means of an increase of five sous a day, I acquired the right to eat alone in the courtyard when it was fine.

So they laid my table in front of the door, and with my teeth I began to tear up the skinny limbs of the Norman chicken, drinking light cider and munching coarse white bread, four days old, but excellent.

Suddenly the wooden gate, which led into the road, opened, and a strange person made her way towards the house. She was very thin, very tall, and so tightly wrapped in a red-checked Tartan shawl, that one would have thought she was armless if one had not seen a long hand appear level with her hips, holding a white tourist’s umbrella. Her mummy-like face, framed with sausage-curls of ringleted grey hair, which hopped about at her every step, made me think, I don’t know why, of a red herring bedecked with butterflies. She passed before me quickly, lowering her eyes, and dived into the cottage.

This queer apparition amused me; it was my neighbour, surely, the elderly Englishwoman of whom my landlady had spoken.

I did not see her again that day. The next day, when I had settled down to paint in the bottom of that charming valley that you know, and which descends to Etretat, on suddenly raising my eyes, I saw something odd sticking up on the crest of the slope ; it might have been a mast decked with flags. It was she. Seeing me she disappeared.

I returned for lunch at midday and took my place at the common table, in order to become acquainted with this singular old woman. But she did not reply to my polite remarks, insensible even to my little attentions. I poured out water for her with obstinate persistence, I passed her dishes with eagerness. A slight movement of the head, almost imperceptible, and a word in English murmured so low that I did not hear it, were her only thanks.

I ceased to trouble myself about her, although she disturbed my thoughts.

At the end of three days I knew as much about her as Mme. Lecacheur herself.

She was called Miss Harriet. Seeking an out-of-the-way village in which to pass the summer, she had stopped at Bénouville, six weeks before, and did not seem disposed to leave. She never spoke at table, and ate quickly, reading the while a little book of Protestant propaganda. She distributed these books to everybody. The parish priest himself had received four of them, delivered by an urchin in return for two sous' commission. She would sometimes say to our landlady, suddenly, without anything having paved the way for this declaration : "I love the Lord more than everything ; I admire Him in all His creation, I adore Him in all His nature, I carry Him always in my heart."

And she would straightway hand over to the astonished peasant-woman one of her pamphlets destined to convert the universe.

She was not liked in the village. The school-teacher having declared: "She is an atheist," a sort of reprobation clung to her. The priest, consulted by Mme. Lecacheur, replied: "She is an heretic, but God does not wish the death of the sinner, and I believe her to be a person of irreproachable morals."

These words "Atheist—Heretic," the precise meaning of which they did not know, cast doubts into people's minds. They asserted, moreover, that the Englishwoman was rich, and that she had spent her life travelling in all the countries of the world, because her family had driven her out. And why had her family turned her out? Because of her impiety, naturally.

She was, in truth, one of those fanatics devoted to a Cause, one of those stubborn Puritans of whom England produces so many, one of those old and good, unbearable women who haunt the public dining-rooms of Europe, mar Italy, poison Switzerland, render uninhabitable the charming towns of the Mediterranean, bring everywhere their odd manias, their morals of petrified vestals, their indescribable clothes, and a certain smell of rubber, which makes one think that, at night, they are slipped into a sheath.

Whenever I saw one in an hotel, I fled like the birds on seeing a scare-crow in a field.

This one, however, appeared so strange to me that she did not displease me.

Mme. Lecacheur, instinctively hostile to every-

thing that was not peasant, felt, in her limited mind, a sort of hate for the ecstatic behaviour of the old spinster. She had found an expression to describe her, a contemptuous expression of course, which had come to her lips I know not how, summoned by I know not what confused and mysterious working of the mind. She said : "She is a demoniac." And this term, applied to this austere and sentimental creature, seemed to me irresistibly comical. I myself no longer called her anything but "the demoniac," experiencing a queer pleasure in pronouncing these syllables aloud whenever I saw her.

I asked Mother Lecacheur : "Well, what is our demoniac doing to-day?"

And the peasant-woman replied in a shocked manner :

"Would you believe it, Monsieur ; she picked up a toad whose leg had been crushed, an' she carried it into her room, an' she put it in her basin, an' she put a dressing on it like you would on a man. If that isn't a profanation !"

Another time, when out walking at the foot of the cliffs, she had bought a big fish which had just been caught, only to throw it back into the sea. And the sailor, although paid liberally, had heaped insults on her in profusion, more exasperated than if she had taken the money in his pocket. After a month he still could not talk about it without getting into a rage and shouting abuse. Oh yes ! she was certainly a demoniac, Miss Harriet, Mother Lecacheur had had a stroke of genius in baptising her thus.

The stable-boy, who was called Sapper because he had served in Africa in his young days, fostered

other opinions. He said in a sly way: "She's an old lag, who's served her time."

What if the old girl had ever known?

The little maid Céleste did not like serving her, without my ever being able to understand why. Perhaps solely because she was a foreigner, of another race, another language and another religion. In fact she was a demoniac!

She spent her time wandering through the fields, seeking and worshipping God in nature. I found her, one evening, on her knees in a thicket. Having distinguished something red through the leaves, I drew aside the branches, and Miss Harriet started up, confused at having been seen thus, fixing scared eyes on me like those of brown owls surprised in full daylight.

Sometimes, when I was working in the rocks, I would catch sight of her suddenly on the edge of the cliffs, like a semaphore signal. She was gazing passionately at the vast sea, golden with light, and the great sky, purpled with fire. Sometimes I would discern her at the bottom of a valley, walking quickly with her springy Englishwoman's stride; and I would go towards her, drawn by I know not what, simply to see her visionary's face, her dry, indescribable face, content with a profound, inner joy.

Often too, I would come across her by the corner of a farm, sitting on the grass, under the shade of an apple-tree, with her little biblical book open on her knees, and her look wandering far away.

For I was no longer on the move, tied as I was to this peaceful country by a thousand bonds of love for its broad and gentle landscapes. I was at peace in this secluded farm, far from everything, near the

Earth, the good, sound, beautiful, green earth which we ourselves will enrich with our bodies, one day. And perhaps, it must be confessed, a tiny bit of curiosity also kept me at Mother Lecacheur's. I should have liked to get to know this strange Miss Harriet a little, and to find out what goes on in the lonely souls of these old, wandering Englishwomen.

II

We became acquainted in a strange enough fashion. I had just finished a study which seemed to me first-rate, and was. It was sold for ten thousand francs fifteen years later. It was, moreover, simpler than two and two make four, and beyond academic rules. All the right side of my canvas represented a rock, an enormous, warty rock, covered with brown, yellow and red sea-wrack, on which the sun streamed like oil. The light, without one's seeing the orb hidden behind me, fell on to the stone and gilded it with fire. That was that. A foreground dazzling with light, ablaze, superb.

On the left the sea, not the blue sea, the slate-gray sea, but the sea of jade, greenish, milky, and hard too under the heavy sky.

I was so pleased with my work that I was dancing when I took it back to the inn. I should have liked the whole world to see it straightway. I remember I showed it to a cow by the side of the path and cried :

“Take a look at that, old thing. You won't often see anything like it.”

Arriving in front of the house, I immediately called Mother Lecacheur, bawling at the top of my voice :

"Hi ! there ! Mother ! bring yourself out and take a look at this !"

The peasant-woman arrived and considered my work with her stupid eye which could distinguish nothing, which could not even see if it represented an ox or a house.

Miss Harriet returned, and she passed behind at the moment when, holding my canvas at arm's length, I was showing it to the landlady. The demoniac could not help seeing it, for I had taken care to hold it in such a way that it could not escape her eye. She stopped dead, thrilled, stupefied. It was her rock, it seems, the one on to which she climbed to dream at her ease.

She murmured a British "Oh !" that was so emphasized and so flattering that I turned to her, smiling, and said :

"This is my latest study, Mademoiselle."

She murmured, enraptured, comical and maudlin :

"Oh ! Monsieur ! you understand nature in a heart-throbbing way !"

I blushed, I declare, more moved by this compliment than if it had come from a queen. I was charmed, conquered, vanquished. Upon my word, I would have embraced her !

I sat down to table beside her, as always. She talked for the first time, continuing her thought aloud : "Oh ! I love nature so much !"

I offered her bread, water, wine. She accepted now with a little, mummified smile. And I began to talk landscape painting.

Having got up together after the meal, we began to walk across the courtyard; then, drawn doubtless by the tremendous conflagration which the setting sun was kindling on the sea, I opened the gate which led to the cliffs, and we were off, side by side, contented as two people are who have just understood and discovered one another.

It was a soft, warm evening, one of those peaceful evenings when body and mind are happy. There is delight and charm in everything. The mild, balmy air, full of the smell of herbs and sea-weed, caresses the senses with its wild perfume, caresses the palate with its salty savour, and caresses the mind with its penetrating sweetness. We were walking now on the edge of the precipice above the vast sea which rolled its little waves three hundred feet beneath us. And, with open mouth and expanded chest, we drank in that fresh breeze which had come over the Atlantic, and which slowly slid over our skin, salted by the long kiss of the waves.

Tightly wrapped in her Tartan shawl, with an inspired look and her teeth bared to the wind, the Englishwoman was contemplating the enormous sun sinking towards the sea. In front of us, in the distance, just within sight, a three-master, crowded with sail, traced its silhouette against the flaming sky, and a steamer was passing nearer us, unfurling its smoke which left behind it an endless cloud stretching across the whole horizon.

The red globe was still descending, slowly. And soon it touched the water, just behind the motionless vessel, which appeared in the middle of the resplendent orb, as in a frame of fire. It gradually sank, devoured by the ocean. We saw it plunge,

dwindle, disappear. It was over. Alone the little craft still showed its sharp outline against the golden back-cloth of the distant sky.

Miss Harriet gazed upon the flaming end of the day with an impassioned look. And most certainly she had an immoderate desire to embrace the sky, the sea and all the horizon.

She murmured : "Oh ! I love . . . I love . . . I love. . . ." I saw a tear in her eye. She continued : "I should like to be a little bird to fly away into the firmament."

And she stood there, as I had seen her often, silhouetted on the cliff, red too in her purple shawl. I had a mind to sketch her in my album. It might have been called the caricature of ecstasy.

I turned round so that I should not smile.

Then I talked to her about painting, as I would have done to a fellow-artist, taking note of tones, values and strengths, in technical terms. She listened to me attentively, understanding, seeking to divine the obscure meaning of the words, to fathom my thoughts. From time to time she declared : "Oh ! I understand, I understand. It is very thrilling."

We returned.

On seeing me the next day, she quickly came to offer me her hand. And we were friends at once.

She was a worthy creature who had a sort of soul that worked on springs, leaping to rapture in skips and bounds. She lacked equilibrium, like all women who are still spinsters at fifty. She seemed to be pickled in sour innocence ; but she had kept in her heart something very young and glowing. She loved nature and animals, with an exalted love which had

fermented like an over-matured liquor, and with the sensual love she had never given to men.

It is certain that the sight of a suckling bitch, a mare running in a meadow with its foal between its legs, a bird's nest full of little ones, squalling with open beaks, enormous heads, and their bodies quite naked, made her throb with exaggerated emotion.

Poor creatures of hotel dining-rooms, lonely, wandering and sad, poor, ridiculous and sorrowful creatures, I love you all since I came to know this one !

I soon perceived that she had something to tell me, but she did not dare, and I was amused by her timidity. When I left in the morning with my box on my back, she would accompany me to the end of the village, speechless, visibly anxious, and searching for words to begin. Then she left me abruptly and walked away quickly, with her springy step.

One day at last she plucked up courage : "I should like to watch you paint. Do you mind? I am very curious." And she blushed as if she had said something extremely bold.

I took her down to the Little Vale, where I was starting on a big study.

She remained standing behind me, following all my gestures with concentrated attention.

Then, suddenly, afraid perhaps of disturbing me, she said "Thank you" and went away.

But in a short while she became more at home and she began to accompany me every day with obvious pleasure. She carried her camp-stool under her arm, refusing to let me take it, and she would sit down by my side. She stayed there for hours, following with her eyes the end of my brush in all its move-

ments. When I achieved an apt and unexpected effect with a broad splash of colour, suddenly applied with the knife, despite herself she would utter a little "Oh!" of surprise, joy and admiration. She had a feeling of tender respect for my canvases, an almost religious respect for this human reproduction of a particle of the Divine Work. My studies seemed to her kinds of holy images; and sometimes she would talk to me about God, trying to convert me.

Oh! He was a queer, simple old soul, her good God, a sort of village philosopher, with no great resources and no great power, for she always imagined Him to be desolated by the injustices committed before His eyes—as if He had not been able to prevent them.

She was, moreover, on excellent terms with Him, seeming even to be the confidante of His secrets and His difficulties. She would say: "God wishes it," or "God does not wish it," like a sergeant who might tell the recruit that: "The Colonel has given orders."

From the bottom of her heart she deplored my ignorance of celestial intentions, which she strove to reveal to me; and every day I would find, in my pockets, in my hat when I left it on the ground, in my paint-box, in my shoes, polished and left before my door in the morning, those little pamphlets of piety which she doubtless received direct from Paradise.

I treated her as an old friend, with cordial frankness. But I soon noticed that her manner had changed a little. I paid no attention to it early on.

When I was working, either down in my valley, or in some sunken lane, I would see her suddenly appear, coming towards me with her rapid, rhythmical walk. She would sit down abruptly,

breathless, as if she had been running or as if she were stirred by some deep emotion. She was very red, that English red which is the property of no other race; then, for no reason, she would turn pale, become the colour of clay, and seemed on the point of fainting. Gradually, however, I saw her regain her normal appearance and she would begin to talk.

Then, suddenly, she would leave a phrase half finished, get up, and rush away so quickly and so strangely that I tried to remember if I had done anything that might have displeased or hurt her.

In the end I thought that this must be her normal manner, doubtless a little modified in my honour during the early days of our acquaintance.

When she returned to the farm after hours of walking on the wind-beaten shore, her long hair, twisted into spirals, often came unrolled and hung down as if the springs had been broken. Formerly she scarcely bothered about it and would come along to dinner, with no embarrassment, her hair tousled as it was by her sister the wind.

Now she would go up to her room to arrange what I called her lamp-glasses; and when I said to her with a familiar gallantry that always shocked her: "You are as beautiful as a star today, Miss Harriet," a little blood immediately rose to her cheeks, the blood of a young girl, the blood of a fifteen-year-old.

Then she became quite unsociable again and ceased coming to see me paint. I thought: "It's a nervous fit, it will pass." But it did not pass. When I spoke to her now, she would answer me, either with feigned indifference, or with sullen irritation. And she had sudden fits of brusqueness, impa-

tient nerves. I only saw her at meals and we scarcely talked any more. I really thought I had hurt her feelings in some way; and I asked her one evening: "Miss Harriet, why are you no longer the same with me as you used to be? What have I done to displease you? You cause me much sorrow."

She replied, in an angry tone that was altogether queer: "I am still the same with you as I used to be. It isn't true, it isn't true," and she ran and shut herself up in her room.

Now and then she would look at me in a strange fashion. I have often said to myself since then that men condemned to death must look thus when their last day is announced. There was a kind of madness in her eye, a mystic and violent madness; and something else too, a fever, an exasperated, impatient and powerless desire for the unrealized and the unrealizable! And it seemed to me that within her there was also a struggle, in which her heart battled against an unknown force that she wanted to overcome, and perhaps something else to . . . How do I know? How do I know?

III

It was really a strange revelation.

For some time I had been working every morning, at day-break, on a picture, the subject of which was this:

A deep, cavernous ravine, overhung by two slopes of brambles and trees, stretched away, remote and desolate, drowned in that milky vapour, that cotton-wool, which sometimes hovers over valleys at day-break. And right in the depths of this thick,

transparent mist, one saw, or rather one sensed, a human couple approaching, a lad and a girl, embracing, intertwined, she with her head raised towards him, he leaning over her, mouth to mouth.

An early ray of sunshine, slipping between the branches, penetrated this auroral mist, lit it up with a rosy glow behind the rustic lovers, and clothed their vague shadows in silvery brightness. It was good, upon my word, very good.

I was working in the gully which leads to the little valley of Etretat. By chance I had, that morning, the floating mist I needed.

Something arose before me, like a phantom; it was Miss Harriet. On seeing me she wanted to flee. But I called her, crying: "Come, Mademoiselle, come, I have a little picture for you."

She approached, as if reluctantly. I handed her my sketch. She said nothing, but she stood still a long time looking at it, and suddenly she began to cry. She cried in nervous spasms, like people who have fought much against their tears, and, overwhelmed at last, give way though still resisting. I got up with a start, deeply moved myself by this grief which I did not understand, and I took her hands in a sudden impulse of affection, the typical gesture of a Frenchman, who acts quicker than he thinks. She left her hands in mine for a few seconds, and I felt them quiver, as if all the nerves had been wrenched. Then she hastily withdrew, or rather, tore them away.

I had recognized it, that tremor, from having felt it before; and nothing could make me mistake it. Ah! a woman's thrill of love, be she fifteen or fifty, be she of the people or a woman of fashion, goes so

straight to my heart that I never have any hesitation in understanding it.

All her poor being had trembled, vibrated, fainted away. I knew it. She went away without my having said a word, leaving me surprised as if in the presence of a miracle, and desolated as if I had committed a crime.

I did not return for lunch. I went for a walk on the edge of the cliffs, as much inclined to cry as to laugh, finding the affair comical and deplorable, feeling myself to be ridiculous and imagining her to be madly unhappy.

I asked myself what I ought to do.

I considered there was nothing for it but to leave, and I immediately resolved to do so.

After wandering around until dinner-time, a little sad, a little pensive, I returned for supper.

We sat down to table as usual. Miss Harriet was there, and ate gravely, without speaking to anyone or raising her eyes. Otherwise she looked and behaved as she normally did.

I waited for the end of the meal, then, turning to the landlady: "Well, Madame Lecacheur, I shall be leaving you soon."

The good woman, surprised and upset, exclaimed in her slow voice: "What's that you are saying, Sir? You are going to leave us? And we'd got so used to you!"

I looked at Miss Harriet out of the corner of my eye; her face had not changed. But Céleste, the little maid, had just raised her eyes to me. She was a plump girl of eighteen, red-cheeked, fresh, strong as a horse, and clean—a rare thing. I used to kiss her sometimes in corners, from the habit of an inn-

frequenter, nothing more.

And dinner was over.

I went to smoke my pipe under the apple-trees, walking up and down, from one end of the court-yard to the other. All the thoughts I had had during the day, the strange discovery in the morning, that grotesque and passionate love centred on me, memories that had come in the wake of this revelation, charming and disturbing memories, perhaps, too, that maid-servant's look raised towards me when I announced my departure, all this, intermingled and combined, now produced a wanton spirit in my body, the tingling of kisses on my lips, and, in my veins, that vague and indescribable feeling which makes one do stupid things.

Night was falling, sliding its shadow under the trees and I saw Céleste going off to shut up the hen-coop on the other side of the enclosure. I darted forward, running with such light steps that she heard nothing, and as she was getting up, after having lowered the little trap-door through which the hens go in and out, I seized her in both arms, raining a hail of kisses on her broad, plump face. She struggled, laughing all the same, used to this sort of thing.

Why did I let her go quickly? Why did I turn round with a start? How did I feel someone behind me?

It was Miss Harriet on her way back: she had seen us, and stood stock-still as if confronted with a ghost. Then she disappeared into the night.

I went back, ashamed, upset, more vexed at having been surprised by her thus, than if she had found me committing some criminal act.

I slept badly, nerve-racked and haunted by sad thoughts. It seemed to me that I heard someone weeping. I was probably mistaken. Several times, too, I thought someone was walking through the house and that the outside door was being opened.

Towards morning, overcome with fatigue, sleep at last came upon me. I awoke late and only showed myself for lunch, still abashed, not knowing what face to put on.

No one had seen Miss Harriet. We waited for her; she did not appear. Mother Lecacheur went into her room, the Englishwoman had gone out. She must have gone out at dawn, as she often did, to see the sunrise.

Nobody was surprised and we began to eat in silence.

It was warm, very warm, one of those hot, sultry days when not a leaf stirs. The table had been dragged outside, under an apple-tree; and from time to time Sapper would go and fill the cider-jug in the cellar, we were drinking so much. Céleste brought the dishes from the kitchen, a mutton and potato stew, a *sauté* rabbit and a salad. Then she placed in front of us a dish of cherries, the first of the season.

Wishing to wash them and cool them, I asked the little maid to go and draw me a bucket of really cold water.

She came back after five minutes declaring that the well was dry. Having lowered the rope to its full length, the bucket had touched the bottom, and then it had come up empty. Mother Lecacheur wanted to see for herself, and went off to look down the shaft. She came back announcing that she could certainly see something in her well, something that wasn't

natural. A neighbour had doubtless thrown in some bundles of straw for revenge.

I wanted to have a look too, hoping that I would be able to see better, and I leant over the edge. I vaguely saw a white object. But what was it? I then had the idea of lowering a lantern at the end of a rope. The yellow glimmer danced on the stone facings of the well, sinking gradually. We were all four of us leaning over the mouth, Sapper and Céleste having rejoined us. The lantern came to a halt above a vague heap, white and black, strange, incomprehensible. Sapper exclaimed :

“It’s a horse. I can see the hoof. It must have fallen in last night after getting out of the meadow.”

But suddenly, I shuddered to the marrow. I had just recognised a foot, then a leg sticking up; the entire body and the other leg were out of sight under the water.

I stammered, very low, and trembling so violently, that the lantern danced crazily above the shoe :

“It’s a . . . a . . . woman down there . . . it’s Miss Harriet.”

Sapper alone did not flinch. He had seen plenty of others in Africa !

Mother Lecacheur and Céleste began to utter piercing cries, and took to their heels.

The body of the dead woman had to be recovered. I tied a rope securely round the groom’s middle and then let him down by means of the pulley, very slowly, watching him sink down into the gloom. He held a lantern in his hands and another rope. Soon his voice, which seemed to come from the centre of the earth, cried : “Stop;” and I saw him fishing something out of the water, the other leg, then he

ties the two feet together and shouted again : "Haul up."

I pulled him up : but I felt my arms breaking, the muscles limp, and I was afraid of losing my grip on the handle and letting the man fall. When his head appeared at the brink, I asked : "Well?" as if I had expected him to give me news of the woman who was down there, at the bottom.

We both climbed on to the stone curb and, face to face, bending over the shaft, we began to hoist the body.

Mother Lecacheur and Céleste were watching us from a distance, hidden behind the wall of the house. When they saw the black shoes and white stockings of the drowned woman emerging from the shaft, they disappeared.

Sapper seized the ankles and we drew her up that way, the poor chaste woman, in the most immodest posture. The face was ghastly, black and lacerated ; and her long grey hair, all undone, unrolled for ever, hung down, dripping and muddy. Sapper declared in a contemptuous voice :

"By God, she's thin!"

We carried her into her room and, as the two women did not reappear, together with the stable-boy, I prepared the body.

I washed her sad, distorted face. Under my finger an eye opened a little, and looked at me with that pale look, that cold look, that terrible look which corpses have, and which seems to come from the hinterland of life. I dressed her dishevelled hair as well as I could, and, with clumsy hands, arranged a new and strange coiffure on her brow. Then I removed her soaking clothes, with shame, and as if

I had committed a profanation, uncovering a little her shoulders and breast and her long white arms as thin as twigs.

Then I went to look for flowers, poppies, corn-flowers, daisies and fresh, scented grass, with which I covered her funeral couch.

Then I had to carry out the usual formalities, being the only one near at hand. A letter which I found in her pocket, written at the last moment, asked that she should be buried in this village where her last days had been spent. A dreadful thought wrenched my heart. Was it not on account of me that she wanted to remain in this spot?

Towards evening the gossips of the neighbourhood came along to view the dead woman; but I kept them out; I wanted to remain alone; and I watched over the body all night.

I gazed at her in the glimmer of the candles, the miserable woman, unknown to everyone, who had died so far away and so sorrowfully. Had she left friends behind somewhere, relations? What had her childhood and her life been? Whence had she come thus, all alone, wandering, lost like a dog driven from its home? What secret of suffering and despair was locked up in this ungraceful body, in this body borne throughout her whole life like a shameful blemish, a ridiculous envelope which had alienated from her all affection and love?

How unhappy some people are! I felt weighing on this human creature the eternal injustice of implacable Nature! It was all over for her, without perhaps her ever having had what sustains the most penniless, the hope of being loved once! For why did she hide herself thus, why did she flee others?

Why did she love, with such passionate tenderness, all things and all living beings that were not human?

And I realized that she believed in God, this woman, and that she had hoped for the compensation for her misery elsewhere. She was now going to decompose and become a plant in her turn. She would blossom in the sun, be browsed by the cows, borne off in grain by the birds, and, flesh of the animals, she would become human flesh again. But what is called her soul had been extinguished at the bottom of the dark well. She suffered no more. She had changed her life for other lives which she would bring into being.

The hours passed in this sinister, silent, *tête-à-tête*. A pale gleam announced the dawn; then a red ray slid on to the bed, and laid a bar of fire on the sheets and on the hands. It was the hour she loved so much. The waking birds sang in the trees.

I opened the window wide, I drew aside the curtains so that the whole sky should see us, and, leaning over the icy corpse, I took the disfigured face in my hands, then, slowly, with no terror or disgust, I placed a kiss, a long kiss, on those lips which had never received one. . .

Léon Chenal was silent. The women were crying. On the box the Comte d'Etraille was heard repeatedly blowing his nose. Only the driver dozed. And the horses, feeling the whip no more, had slackened their pace and were pulling lazily. And the break only moved forward with difficulty now, grown heavy suddenly, as if weighed down with sorrow.

THE INHERITANCE

I

To Catulle Mendès

ALTHOUGH it was not yet ten o'clock the clerks were arriving in a flood under the great gateway of the Ministry of Marine, coming in haste from the four corners of Paris, for New Year's Day was approaching, the time for zeal and promotions. The noise of hastening foot-steps filled the vast building, tortuous like a labyrinth, intersected by inextricable corridors, which were pierced with innumerable doors giving access to the offices.

Everyone entered his cubicle, shook hands with the colleague who had already arrived, took off his jacket, put on the old work-coat, and sat down at his table where heaped-up papers were awaiting him. Then they went for news into the nearby offices. First they inquired if the Chief was in, if he looked well disposed, if the day's mail was copious.

The registering-clerk for "general matters", M. César Cachelin, an ex-non-commissioned officer of the Marines, who had become senior clerk solely by virtue of his long service, was registering in a big book all the documents the office-serjeant had just brought in. Facing him, the copying-clerk, Papa Savon, a stupid old fool, famous throughout the Ministry for his conjugal misfortunes, was transcrib-

ing a despatch for the Chief, in a slow hand, and was applying himself with his body on one side, his eye askance, in the stiff posture of the meticulous copyist.

M. Cachelin, a stout man, whose short, white hair stood up stiffly on his head, talked the while he performed his daily tasks : "Thirty-two despatches from Toulon. That port there gives us as much to do as the other four put together." Then he asked Papa Savon the question he always put to him every morning :

"Well, Papa Savon, how's Madame?"

The old man replied, without interrupting his work : "You know very well, Monsieur Cachelin, that that subject is very painful to me."

And the registering-clerk began to laugh, as he laughed every day when he heard this same phrase.

The door opened and M. Maze came in. He was a dark, handsome young man, dressed with an exaggerated elegance, who thought himself out of his class, deeming his appearance and manners to be above his circumstances. He wore heavy rings, a thick watch-chain, a monocle, for appearance only, as he removed it to work, and he was always edging forward his wrists to display the cuffs adorned with great shining links.

Coming in at the door, he asked : "Much work to-day?"

M. Cachelin replied : "It's always Toulon sending it. One can easily see that the New Year is not far off ; they're making a big show of hard work, down there."

But another clerk, a humourist and wit, M. Pitolet, appeared in his turn and laughingly asked : "And

you mean to say we don't do the same?"

Then, drawing out his watch, he declared : "Seven minutes to ten and everyone at his desk ! Good gracious ! what do you call that ? And I bet you anything that His Worship M. Lesable arrived at nine o'clock at the same time as our illustrious Chief."

The registering-clerk stopped writing, put his pen behind his ear, and, leaning his elbows on the desk, said : "Oh ! him, by Jove, if he doesn't succeed it won't be for lack of trying !"

And M. Pitolet, sitting down on the corner of the table and swinging his leg, replied : "But he will succeed, Papa Cachelin, he will succeed, be sure of it. I bet you twenty francs to a sou that he will be Chief in ten years ?"

M. Maze, who was rolling a cigarette and warming his legs at the fire, declared : "Damn it ! For my part I'd sooner stay at the two thousand four hundred mark all my life than kill myself with work as he does."

Pitolet pivoted round on his heels, and said in a jeering voice : "Which, my dear fellow, does not prevent you from being here, to-day, the 20th of December, before ten o'clock."

But the other shrugged his shoulders indifferently : "Good Heavens, I don't want everybody else to trample me down, either ! Since you come here to see the dawn, I do the same, although I deplore your eagerness. It's a long way from that to calling the Chief 'dear Master,' and leaving at half-past six, and taking work home. Besides, I live in society, and have other obligations which take up my time."

M. Cachelin had stopped registering and he re-

mained pensive, looking far away. At last he asked: "Do you think he'll get his promotion again this year?"

Pitolet exclaimed: "Get his promotion? Of course he'll get it, and ten times over. He's not artful for nothing."

And they talked of the eternal question of promotions and gratuities, which, for the last month, had distracted this great bee-hive of bureaucrats, from the ground-floor to the roof.

They reckoned chances, they conjectured figures, they weighed claims, they became indignant, in advance, at expected injustices. They continually came back to discussions held the day before, and which were inevitably bound to arise again the next day, with the same reasons, the same arguments, and the same words.

Another clerk entered, small, pale, with a sickly look, M. Boissel, who lived as if in a novel of Alexandre Dumas, the Father. To him everything became an extraordinary adventure, and every morning he would relate to Pitolet, his companion, the strange encounters he had made the evening before, the alleged dramas in his house, cries uttered in the street which had made him open his window at twenty minutes past three in the night. Every day he had separated people fighting, stopped run-away horses, rescued women in danger, and, although of deplorable physical weakness, he related, in a slow, sincere way, countless exploits accomplished by the strength of his arm.

As soon as he realised they were talking about Lesable, he declared: "Some day I'll give that wretch a piece of my mind; and if he ever tramples

on my toes, I'll give him such a lesson that it'll teach him never to do it again !"

Maze, who was still smoking, sneered : "You would do well," he said, "to start from to-day, for I know from a reliable authority that you have been set aside this year to make way for Lesable !"

Boissel raised his hand : "I swear that if . . ."

The door had opened again, and a young man of small stature, wearing the side-whiskers of a naval officer or lawyer, a straight, very high collar, and who brought his words out in a rush as if he had never been able to find time to finish what he had to say, entered quickly with a preoccupied air. He distributed hand-shakes like a man who hasn't the time to idle, and, approaching the registering-clerk, he said : "My dear Cachelin, would you give me the Chapelou dossier, rope-yarn, Toulon, A. T. V. 1875?"

The clerk got up, reached for a portfolio above his head, took out from it a bundle of documents wrapped in a blue cover, and handed them over : "Here we are, Monsieur Lesable; you know that the Chief took three despatches from this dossier yesterday?"

"Yes, I've got them, thank you."

And the young man went out with a quick step.

Scarcely had he gone than Maze declared : "Huh ! what style ! You'd swear he was Chief already."

And Pitolet replied : "Patience ! patience ! he will be before all of us."

M. Cachelin had not resumed his writing. One might have believed he was obsessed with the thought. He declared again : "He has a fine future, that boy !"

And Maze murmured in a disdainful way: "To those who consider the Ministry a career—yes.—To others—it's not much."

Pitolet interrupted him: "You intend perhaps to become an ambassador?"

The other made an impatient gesture: "I'm not talking about myself. I don't care a hang, one way or the other. All the same—the position of Head of a Department will never count for much in the world."

Papa Savon, the copying-clerk, had not ceased writing. But for the last few minutes he had been repeatedly dipping his pen in the ink-well, then wiping it obstinately on the wet sponge which surrounded the ink-pot, without succeeding in tracing a single letter. The black liquid slid down the length of the metal point, and fell, in round blots, on the paper. The old fellow, frantic and in despair, looked at his copy which he would have to begin again, like so many others of late, and said in a low, sad voice:

"Here's some more adulterated ink! . . ."

A roar of violent laughter burst from every mouth. Cachelin shook the table with his belly; Maze bent double as if he were going to go backwards into the fireplace; Pitolet tapped with his foot, coughed, waved his right hand about as if it had got wet, and Boissel himself was choking, although he generally took things in the tragic rather than the comic vein.

But Papa Savon, wiping his pen at last on the tail of his coat, continued: "There's nothing to laugh about. I have to do all my work again, two or three times."

He drew out another sheet of paper from his

blotter, adjusted his ruled copying paper underneath, and began the heading again: "Monsieur the Minister and dear colleague. . . ."

The pen now retained the ink and traced the letters clearly. And the old man took up his oblique position again and went on with his copying.

The others had not stopped laughing. They were almost choking. For they had been playing the same joke on the old fellow now for nearly six months, and he had not noticed anything. It consisted in pouring a few drops of oil on the wet sponge that was used for cleaning the nibs. The steel, being thus coated with oily liquid, would not take up the ink; and the copying-clerk spent hours of astonishment and desolation, used up boxes of nibs and bottles of ink, and at last declared that the office supplies had become completely defective.

Then the joking had turned to obsession and torture. They mixed gun-powder with the old man's tobacco, they poured medicines into his jug of water, a glass of which he drank from time to time, and they made him believe that, since the Commune, most of the materials for current use had been adulterated thus by the socialists, to harm the government and bring about a revolution.

As a result of this he had conceived a terrible hate for the anarchists, whom he believed to be ambushed and hidden everywhere, and a mysterious fear of a formidable, masked stranger.

But the peremptory ring of a bell sounded in the corridor. They knew it well, that furious ring of the Chief, M. Torchebeuf; and everyone rushed for the door to regain his own cubicle.

Cachelin recommenced his registering, then put

his pen down again, and placed his head in his hands to reflect.

He was bringing to maturity an idea which had tormented him for some time. Ex-non-commissioned Officer of the Marines, invalided out after receiving three wounds, one at Senegal and two in Cochin-China, and admitted to the Ministry by special favour, he had had to endure many misfortunes, hardships and mortifications during his lengthy career as lowest subordinate ; so he looked on authority, official authority, as the finest thing in the world. The Head of a Department seemed to him an exceptional being, living in a higher sphere, and the clerks of whom he heard people say : "he's a smart fellow, he'll get on quickly," appeared to him as of a different race, a different nature to his.

So, for his colleague Lesable he had a special consideration which bordered on veneration, and he fostered the secret desire, the obstinate desire, to get him married to his daughter.

She would be rich one day, very rich. That was known throughout the whole Ministry, for his sister, Mlle. Cachelin, had a million, a million net, in liquid and solid assets, acquired through love, so they said, but purified by later piety.

The old girl, who had been gay in her time, had retired with five hundred thousand francs, which she had more than doubled in eighteen years, thanks to very rigid economy and to ways of living that were more than modest. For a long time she had been living with her brother, a widower with a daughter, Coralie ; but she contributed only in an insignificant way to the household expenses, guarding and hoarding her gold, and ceaselessly repeating to Cachelin :

"It doesn't matter to you, as it will go to your daughter, but marry her off quickly, because I want to see my grandnephews. She's the one who'll give the joy of clasping a child of our blood."

The matter was known throughout the Department, and suitors were not lacking. They said that Maze himself, the handsome Maze, the lion of the office, hung around old man Cachelin with an obvious intention. But the ex-serjeant, a cunning old fellow who had knocked around in all parts of the world, wanted a young man with a future, a young man who would be Chief and who would lavish consideration on him, César, the old non-com. Lesable answered his purpose admirably, and for a long time he had been trying to find a means of getting him to his house.

Suddenly he stood up, rubbing his hands. He had found it.

He was well aware of everybody's weakness. Lesable could only be got at through vanity, professional vanity. He would go and ask him for his support, as one goes to a Senator or a Deputy, as one goes to an important personage.

Having had no promotion for the last five years, Cachelin thought that he was pretty certain to get it this year. He would therefore pretend to believe that he owed it to Lesable and would invite him to dinner as thanks.

No sooner had he conceived his plan than he began its execution. He unhooked his street-coat from the cupboard, took off his old one, and, collecting all the documents he had registered which concerned his colleague's department, he repaired to the office which the latter occupied all alone, by special pri-

vilege, in consideration of his zeal and the importance of his duties.

The young man was writing at a big table, in the midst of open files and scattered papers, numbered in red or black ink.

As soon as he saw the registering-clerk walk in, he asked, in a familiar tone in which one could detect consideration : "Well, my dear fellow, are you bringing me a lot of work?"

"Yes, quite a bit. And I'd like to speak to you as well."

"Sit down, my friend, I'm listening."

Cachelin sat down, coughed a little, put on a troubled look, and began in an unsteady voice : "This is what brings me, Monsieur Lesable. I won't beat about the bush. I'll be blunt like an old soldier, I've come to ask you a favour."

"What?"

"Just this. I need to get my promotion this year. I've no one to support me and I thought of you."

Lesable blushed a little, surprised, happy, full of proud confusion. He replied however :

"But I count for nothing here, my friend. I am much less important than you who are going to be senior clerk. I can do nothing. Believe me if. . ."

Cachelin cut him short with respectful abruptness : "Nonsense. The Chief listens to you, and if you put in a word for me with him, I'll get through. Just think—I shall have the right to retire in eighteen months, and it'll mean five hundred francs less to me if I get no promotion on the first of January. I know very well that everyone says : 'Cachelin isn't short of cash, his sister has a million.' It's true enough that my sister has a million but that million

is breeding little ones, and she's not giving any away. It's for my daughter, that's true too; but my daughter and myself are two people. I shall be in a pretty mess when my daughter and my son-in-law are keeping a carriage, and I have nothing to put in my belly. You see the position, don't you?"

Lesable nodded assent: "What you say is true, very true. Your son-in-law might not be considerate to you. And besides one is always pleased not to owe anything to anybody. Well, I promise you I'll do what I can. I'll speak to the Chief, I'll put the case before him, I'll insist if it's necessary. You can count on me!"

Cachelin got up, took both hands of his colleague, and shook them in a soldierly fashion; and he stammered: "Thank you, thank you, you can be sure that if I ever find an opportunity . . . If I can ever. . ." He did not finish, finding no way to end his phrase, and he went away, making his rhythmical, ex-soldier's step resound throughout the corridor.

But from afar he heard an angry bell ringing, and he began to run, for he had recognised the sound. It was the Chief, M. Torchebeuf, asking for his registering-clerk.

A week later, Cachelin found, one morning, a sealed letter on his desk, which contained the following :

"My dear colleague, I am happy to tell you that the Minister, on the proposal of our Director and our Chief, yesterday signed your appointment as senior clerk. You will be receiving the official notification

tomorrow. Till then you know nothing, you follow?

Yours
Lesable."

César immediately ran to his young colleague's office, thanked him, apologised, offered his devotion, and was overwhelmed with gratitude.

The next day, to be sure, it was learnt that MM. Lesable and Cachelin had both been promoted. The other clerks would have to wait for a better year, and, as compensation, would draw a bonus varying between a hundred and fifty and three hundred francs.

M. Boissel declared that he would watch out for Lesable at the corner of his street, at midnight, one of these days, and thrash him within an inch of his life. The other clerks said nothing.

On the following Monday, as soon as he arrived, Cachelin repaired to his patron's office, entered solemnly, and declared in a ceremonial voice: "I hope you will be so good as to do us the honour of dining with us to celebrate Twelfth-Night. You shall choose the day yourself."

The young man, a little surprised, raised his head and fixed his eyes on the eyes of his colleague; then he replied, without averting his gaze so that he could read the other's thoughts: "But, my dear fellow, you see . . . all my evenings are taken up now for some time."

Cachelin insisted, in a good-natured way: "Come, don't disappoint us by refusing us after the favour you have done me. I beg of you, in the name of my family and my own."

Lesable, perplexed, hesitated. He had understood, but he did not know what to answer, not having had the time to reflect and to weigh the pros and cons. In the end he thought : "I don't commit myself to anything by going to dinner," and he accepted with a satisfied air, choosing the following Saturday. He added, smiling : "so that I shan't have to get up too early the next day."

II

M. Cachelin lived at the upper end of the Rue Rochechouart, on the fifth storey, in a little flat with a terrace, from which one could see the whole of Paris. He had three bedrooms, one for his sister, one for his daughter, and one for himself ; the dining-room served as a drawing-room.

During the whole week he bustled about in preparation for this dinner. The menu was discussed at length so that it should comprise a homely, yet, at the same time, distinguished meal. It was settled thus : egg *consommé*, hors-d'oeuvres, shrimps and sausage, lobster, a nice chicken, green peas, *pâté de foie gras*, salad, ice-cream and dessert.

The *foie gras* was bought at the nearby pork-butcher's, with the injunction to supply the best quality. After all the jar cost three francs fifty. As for the wine, Cachelin had recourse to the wine-merchant at the corner who supplied him with his litres of cheap red wine with which he usually quenched his thirst. He did not want to go to a big establishment as a result of the following reasoning : "The small dealers find few opportunities to sell their high-class wines. So that they keep them a very long time in

the cellar and they are excellent."

He came back earlier on the Saturday to make sure that everything was ready. His maid, who opened the door for him, was redder than a tomato, for her kitchen-range, which had been alight since midday, for fear of not being ready in time, had roasted her face all day long; and she was agitated too.

He went into the dining-room to inspect everything. In the middle of the little room, the round table formed a big, white patch, under the bright light of the lamp covered with a green shade.

The four plates, covered with napkins folded into bishop's hats by Mlle. Cachelin, the aunt, were flanked by nickel silver cutlery and faced by two glasses, one large and one small. César did not consider this sufficiently impressive and called: "Charlotte!"

The door on the left opened and a short, old woman appeared. Ten years older than her brother, she had a thin face encircled with curls of white hair achieved by means of curl-papers. Her thin voice seemed too weak for her bent little body, and she walked with a shuffling gait and sleepy movements. They said of her in her youth: "What a pretty little creature!"

She was now a thin old woman, very tidy because of her old-world habits, self-willed and obstinate, with a narrow, meticulous mind that was easily irritated. Having become very religious she seemed to have completely forgotten her affairs of the past.

She asked: "What do you want?"

He replied: "I think that two glasses don't make much of a show. What if we were to give champagne? It couldn't cost us more than three or four

francs, and we could put out the tall glasses straight away. It would change the look of the whole room."

Mlle. Charlotte replied : "I don't see the use of this expense. Anyway it's you who are paying, it's nothing to do with me."

He hesitated—trying to convince himself : "I'm sure it'll be better. And then it will liven things up for the Twelfth-Night cake." This argument had decided him. He took his hat and went down the stairs again, coming back five minutes later with a bottle which bore on its side, on a large white label decorated with an enormous coat of arms : "The Comte de Chatel—Rénovau's high class, sparkling champagne."

And Cachelin declared : "It only cost me three francs and it appears that it is exquisite."

He himself took the tall glasses out of a cupboard and arranged them in their places.

The door on the right opened. His daughter came in. She was tall, plump and pink, a good-looking girl of sturdy stock, with chestnut-coloured hair and blue eyes. A simple dress set off her rounded, supple figure; her powerful voice, almost like a man's, had those deep notes which make the nerves vibrate. She exclaimed : "Heavens ! Champagne ! how lovely !" clapping her hands in a childish fashion.

Her father said to her : "Now, above all, be nice to this gentleman who has done me a lot of favours."

She began to laugh a sonorous laugh which seemed to say : "I know."

The door-bell rang, doors opened and shut. Lesable appeared. He was wearing a black dress-coat, a white cravat and white gloves. He created

a sensation. Cachelin had rushed forward, confused and delighted: "But my dear fellow, it was quite informal; see, I'm in an ordinary jacket."

The young man replied: "I know, you told me so, but I never go out in the evening without my dress-clothes." He bowed, his opera-hat under his arm, a flower in his button-hole. César introduced him: "My sister, Mlle. Charlotte,—my daughter, Coralie, whom we call Cora for short."

Everybody bowed. Cachelin continued: "We have no drawing-room. It's a little inconvenient, but one gets used to it." Lesable replied: "It is charming!"

Then they relieved him of his hat which he wanted to retain. And he at once began to take off his gloves.

They had sat down; they looked at him from a distance, across the table, and nothing more was said. Cachelin asked: "Did the Chief stay late? I left early to help these ladies."

Lesable replied in an off-hand manner: "No. We left together because we had to discuss the solution of the Brest tarpaulins. It's a highly complicated business which will give us a lot of trouble."

Cachelin thought he ought to make his sister acquainted with things, and, turning to her, said: "Monsieur Lesable deals with all the difficult questions in the office. You might say he under-studies the Chief."

The old girl bowed politely, declaring: "Oh! I know the gentleman has many capabilities."

The maid came in, pushing the door open with her knee, and holding in the air a large soup-tureen in both hands. Then the "master" cried: "Come,

Let's sit down to table. You sit there, Monsieur Lesable, between my sister and my daughter. I don't think you are afraid of the ladies." And the dinner began.

Lesable made a great show of affability, with a little air of self-sufficiency, almost condescension, and he looked sidelong at the girl, astonished at her freshness, her splendid, appetizing healthiness. Mlle. Charlotte made an effort to please, knowing her brother's intentions, and she sustained the trite conversation, which clung to all the commonplaces. Cachelin, radiant, talked in a loud voice, joked, poured out the wine he had bought an hour before at the shop round the corner: "A glass of this little Burgundy, Monsieur Lesable. I don't say it is a famous vintage, but it is good, it has been in the cellar and it is unadulterated; I can answer for that. We get it from friends who come from that part."

The young girl said nothing, a little flushed, a little timid, embarrassed by the proximity of this man of whose thoughts she had an inkling.

When the lobster appeared, César declared: "Here's a fellow I'd like to get acquainted with." Smiling, Lesable related how a writer had called the lobster "the cardinal of the seas" not knowing that before being cooked this creature was black. Cachelin began to laugh with all his might, repeating: "Ah ! ah ! that's very funny." But Mlle. Charlotte, who had become furious, flared up: "I don't see how one can connect the two. That gentleman was misguided. I appreciate all kinds of jokes, all kinds, but I will not have the clergy ridiculed in front of me."

The young man, who wished to please the old girl, profited by the occasion to make a profession of the Catholic faith. He talked about people with bad taste who treated the great truths with levity. And he concluded : "I respect and I venerate the religion of my fathers, I was brought up in it, and I will stick to it to the end of my days."

Cachelin was not laughing any more. He was rolling bread pellets, murmuring : "That's right, that's right." Then he changed the conversation which was boring him, and, by an inclination which is natural to all those who do the same job every day, he asked : "Our friend Maze must have been furious not to get his promotion, don't you think?"

Lesable smiled : "What do you expect? To each according to his deeds!" And they talked about the Ministry, which interested everybody greatly, for the two women knew the employees almost as well as Cachelin himself, by dint of hearing about them every evening. Mlle. Charlotte was much interested in Boissel, because of the adventures he related and his romantic spirit; and Mlle. Cora was secretly interested in the handsome Maze. They had never seen them, for all that.

Lesable talked about them with an air of superiority, as a Minister might have done, passing judgment on his staff.

They listened to him : "Maze doesn't lack a certain merit; but when one wants to succeed, one must work harder than he does. He loves society and pleasures. All that has an unsettling effect on his mind. He will never go far, through his own fault. He will be Chief Assistant, perhaps, thanks to his influence, but nothing more. As for Pitolet,

he writes a good note, one must admit it, he has an elegance of style which one cannot deny, but no depth. With him everything is on the surface. He is a fellow one could not put at the head of an important department, but who might be utilised by an intelligent Chief who explained his work to him."

Mlle. Charlotte asked: "And Monsieur Bois-sel?"

Lesable shrugged his shoulders: "A poor fellow, a poor fellow. He sees nothing in its right proportions. His imaginary stories are enough to send one to sleep. As far as we are concerned, he is a no-good."

Cachelin began to laugh and declared: "The best is Papa Savon." And everybody laughed.

Then they talked about the theatre and the plays of the year. Lesable criticised the drama with the same authority, neatly classifying the dramatists, and defining the strength and weakness of each one with the usual assurance of men who consider themselves infallible and think they know everything.

They had finished the roast. César now uncovered the pot of *foie gras* with elaborate precautions which left no doubt as to the quality of the contents. He said: "I don't know if this one will be a success. But generally they are perfect. We get them from a cousin who lives in Strasbourg."

And with respectful restraint everyone ate the meat contained in the yellow, earthen-ware jar.

When the ice-cream appeared it was disastrous. It was a sauce, a soup, a thin liquid floating in a fruit-dish. The little maid had asked the confectioner's boy, who had come as early as seven o'clock, to take it out of the mould himself, for fear she would not

know how to do it.

Cachelin, desolated, wanted to have it sent back, then he calmed down at the thought of the Twelfth-Night cake, which he sliced mysteriously as if it contained a secret of the highest order. They all fixed their eyes on this symbolic cake and they passed it round, recommending one another to close their eyes before taking their piece.

Who would get the bean? A foolish smile hovered on their lips. M. Lesable uttered a little "ah" of surprise and showed, between his thumb and fore-finger, a big, white bean still covered in cake. Cachelin began to applaud and then cried: "Choose the Queen! choose the Queen!"

A brief hesitation took place in the King's mind. Would it not be politic to choose Mlle. Charlotte? She would be flattered, charmed, won over! Then he reflected that really it was for Mlle. Cora that he had been invited and that he would look a fool if he chose the aunt! So he turned towards his young neighbour, and presenting her with the sovereign pea, he declared: "Mademoiselle, will you permit me to offer it to you?" And they looked at each other face to face for the first time. She said: "Thank you, Monsieur!" and accepted the token of dignity. He thought: "She is really pretty, this girl. She has superb eyes and she's lively, by Jove!"

An explosion made the two women jump. Cachelin had just uncorked the champagne, which was escaping from the bottle in an impetuous rush and was running over the table-cloth. Then the glasses were filled with the frothing wine, and the master of the house declared: "You can see that

it is good quality." But as Lesable was going to drink to prevent his glass from overflowing, César cried: "The King is drinking! The King is drinking! The King is drinking!" and Mlle. Charlotte, exhilarated too, squeaked in her shrill voice: "The King is drinking! The King is drinking!"

Lesable emptied his glass with assurance, and, putting it back on the table, said: "You see that I can carry it off!" Then, turning to Mlle. Cora. "Now it is your turn, Mademoiselle!"

She was going to drink; but everyone having cried: "The Queen is drinking! The Queen is drinking!" she blushed, began to laugh, and put her glass down in front of her.

The end of the dinner was full of gaiety, and the King showed himself attentive and gallant to the Queen. Then, when they had taken liqueurs, Cachelin announced: "The table will be cleared now to give us some room. It is not raining, we can go out on to the terrace for a moment." He insisted on showing the view, although it was night.

So they opened the glass-door. A damp breath of air came in. It was warm outside, as if it were April, and they all went up the step which separated the dining-room from the large balcony. They could see nothing but a vague gleam hovering over the great city, like those crowns of fire they put on the brow of saints. In some places this light seemed brighter, and Cachelin began to explain: "Look, down there, that's the Eden, shining like that. There's the line of the boulevards. By Jove! How clearly one can see them! In the daytime, it is splendid, the view from here. You could travel as much you like, you would never see anything better."

Lesable had leaned his elbows on the iron railing, by the side of Cora, who was looking out into the void, speechless, absorbed, suddenly struck by one of those melancholy moods which sometimes clamp down on the soul. Mlle. Charlotte went back into the room for fear of the damp. Cachelin continued to talk, his arm outstretched, pointing to the directions where the Invalides, the Trocadéro, and the Arc de Triomphe de l'Etoile, were situated.

Lesable asked in a low voice: "And you, Mademoiselle Cora, do you like looking at Paris from here?"

She gave a little start, as if he had woken her up, and replied: "Me? . . Yes, in the evening particularly, I think of what's happening down there, in front of us. How many happy and unhappy people there are in all these houses! If one could see everything, how much one would learn!"

He had drawn nearer until their elbows and shoulders were touching: "It must be enchanting in the moonlight?"

She murmured: "It certainly is. You would think it was an engraving by Gustave Doré. How pleasant it would be if one could walk for a long time along the roofs."

Then he asked her about her tastes, her dreams, her pleasures. And she replied without embarrassment, like the thoughtful girl she was, sensible, and no more dreamy than she need be. He found she was full of good sense, and he said to himself that it would be really nice to be able to encircle with his arm this firm, rounded waist, and to kiss, lingeringly, with little, slow kisses, as one drinks a good brandy in little sips, that fresh cheek, just near the ear, lit

up now by a reflection from the lamp. He felt himself drawn, moved by that feeling of a woman so near him, by that thirst for ripe and virgin flesh, and by that soft charm of the young girl. It seemed to him that he could have stayed there for hours, whole nights, weeks, for ever, leaning near her, feeling her close to him, penetrated by the charm of her contact. And something like a poetic feeling uplifted his heart in the presence of the great Paris stretching before him, lit up, living its nocturnal life, its life of pleasure and indulgence. It seemed to him that he dominated the enormous town, that he soared above it: and he felt that it would be delicious to lean here every evening on this balcony beside this woman, and to love each other, to kiss each other's lips, to embrace far above the vast city, far above all the loves it concealed, above all the vulgar satisfactions, above all the common desires, up near the stars.

There are evenings when the least exalted souls begin to dream, as if they were on wings. Perhaps he was a little drunk.

Cachelin, who had gone off to look for his pipe, came back lighting it: "I know," he said, "that you don't smoke, so I am not offering you any cigarettes. There is nothing better than to smoke one up here. If I had to live lower down, I wouldn't be able to exist. We can live up here because the house belongs to my sister as well as the two next ones, the one on the left and the one on the right. She gets a nice little income from them. They didn't cost her much at the time, these houses." And, turning towards the room, he cried: "How much did you pay for these plots here, Charlotte?"

Then the sharp voice of the old girl began to speak. Lesable only heard scraps of phrases ". . . in 1863. . . 35 francs. . . built later . . . the three houses . . . a banker . . . resold for at least 500,000 francs. . ."

She talked about her fortune with the complacence of an old soldier who relates his campaigns. She enumerated her purchases, the propositions that had been put before her since, the increased values, etc.

Lesable, thoroughly interested, turned round, leaning his back against the iron railing of the terrace. But, as he could still only catch scraps of the explanation, he suddenly left his young neighbour and went back to hear everything; and, sitting down by the side of Mlle Charlotte, he conversed with her at length about the probable increase in rents, and what well-invested money, in shares or landed property, can bring in.

He left about midnight, promising to come back.

A month later the only topic of conversation in the Ministry was the marriage of Jacques-Léopold Lesable to Mlle. Céleste-Coralie Cachelin.

III

The young couple installed themselves on the same floor as Cachelin and Mlle. Charlotte, in an apartment similar to theirs, the tenant of which had been ejected.

Lesable's mind was disturbed, however: the aunt had refused to settle her inheritance on Cora by any definite instrument. She had, however, agreed to swear 'before God' that her will had been made and deposited with M. Belhomme, the solicitor. She

had promised, besides, that all her property would go to her niece, on one condition. Pressed to reveal this condition, she refused to explain herself, but had sworn once again, with a little benevolent smile, that it was an easy one to fulfil.

In the face of these explanations and this obstinacy of the devout old woman, Lesable thought he ought to go ahead, and, as the young girl pleased him greatly, his desire triumphing over his doubts, he had succumbed to the persistent efforts of Cachelin.

Now he was happy, although tormented always by a doubt. And he loved his wife who had not failed his expectations in anything. His life flowed along, peaceful and monotonous. In a few weeks, moreover, he had adapted himself to his new status of married man, and he continued to be the accomplished clerk of before.

The year passed. New Year's Day came round again. To his great surprise he did not get the promotion on which he was relying. Maze and Pitolet were the only ones to pass to the next grade; and Boissel confidentially declared to Cachelin that he was meaning to give his two colleagues a good thrashing, one evening, when they were leaving, in front of the main gate, in the presence of everybody. He did nothing of the sort.

For a whole week Lesable did not sleep from despair at not having been promoted, despite his zeal. And yet he was working like a dog; he was indefinitely replacing the Chief Assistant, M. Rabot, who had been ill for nine months of the year in the Val-de-Grâce Hospital; he went to work every morning at half-past eight; he left every evening at

half-past six. What more could one want? If they were not grateful for such work and such effort, he would do like the others, that was all. To each according to his labour. And how could M. Torchebeuf, who treated him like a son, have sacrificed him thus? He wanted to have his mind clear about it. He would go and find the Chief and have it out with him.

So, one Monday morning, before his colleagues' arrival, he knocked at this potentate's door.

A harsh voice cried: "Come in!" He entered.

Sitting before a big table covered in papers, quite tiny, with a big head which seemed to lie on his blotter, M. Torchebeuf was writing. On seeing his favourite clerk, he said: "Good-day, Lesable; how are you?"

The young man replied: "Good-day, dear master, very well—and you?"

The Chief stopped writing and swivelled his chair round. His slender, frail, thin body, encased in a severely-cut, black frock-coat, seemed altogether out of proportion to the big, leather-backed chair. The rosette of an Officer of the Legion of Honour, enormous, resplendent, also a thousand times too big for the person who was wearing it, shone like a red coal on his narrow chest, which seemed to be crushed beneath his huge head, as if the entire individual had grown into a dome like a mushroom.

The jaw was pointed, the cheeks hollow, the eyes prominent, and the forehead immense, covered with white hair combed straight back.

M. Torchebeuf said: "Sit down, my friend; and tell me what brings you."

To all the other clerks he displayed a military

curtness, looking on himself as a captain on board his ship, for the Ministry represented to him a great vessel, the flag-ship of the whole French navy.

Lesable, a little uneasy, a little pale, stammered : "Dear master, I have come to ask you if I have done anything wrong?"

"Of course not, my dear fellow, why do you ask me that question?"

"You see, I was a little surprised not to get my promotion this year as in the previous years. Permit me to explain myself to the end, dear master, asking forgiveness for my audacity. I know that I have received special favours and unhoped-for benefits from you. I know that promotion is usually given only every two or three years: but allow me again to point out to you that I give the office almost four times the work an ordinary clerk does, and at least twice the time: if, then, the result of my efforts in the way of work were weighed against the results as remuneration, one would certainly find the former much below the latter!"

He had prepared his wording with care and he thought it excellent.

M. Torchebeuf, surprised, sought round for his reply. At last, in rather a cold voice, he replied : "Although, in principle, it is not permissible to discuss these things between Chief and clerk, for this once I am willing to answer you, having regard to your very meritorious service.

"I put your name up for promotion as in preceding years. But the Director set it aside, basing his action on the fact that your marriage guarantees for you a prosperous future, more than easy circumstances, a for-

tune which your humble colleagues can never expect to get. Is it not fair, on the whole, to take everyone's position into consideration a little? You will become rich, very rich, three hundred francs more per year will be nothing to you, whilst this little increase will count for a lot in the pockets of others. That, my friend, is the reason which kept you back this year."

Lesable withdrew, confused and angry.

In the evening, at dinner, he was disagreeable to his wife. She was usually gay and easy-tempered enough, but self-willed; and she would never yield when she really wanted something. She no longer had for him the sensual charm of the early days, and, although he always had an awakening desire, for she was fresh and pretty, at moments he felt that disillusionment, so akin to anguish, which life in common between two people soon produces. The thousand trivial or grotesque details of life, the careless attire in the mornings, the coarse woollen house-coat, old and threadbare, the faded dressing-gown, for they were not rich, and also all the necessary tasks seen from too close at hand in a poor household, took the gilt off the marriage for him, and faded that flower of poetry which charms, from afar, the young unmarried.

Aunt Charlotte also made his home-life unpleasant, for she never left them: she interfered with everything, wanted to run everything, made observations on everything, and, as they were horribly afraid of offending her, they put up with everything resignedly, but also with growing, concealed exasperation.

She walked through the flat with her shuffling,

old woman's step; and her shrill voice spoke continually: "You really ought to do this; you really ought to do that."

When the married couple found themselves alone, Lesable, at the end of his tether, would cry: "Your aunt is becoming unbearable. I don't want any more of her. Do you hear? I don't want any more of her." And Cora would reply calmly: "What do you expect me to do?"

Then he would get angry: "It is hateful to have relations like that!"

And she would reply, still calm: "Yes, the relations are hateful, but the legacy is good, isn't it? Don't pretend to be stupid. You have as much interest as I have in taking care not to offend aunt Charlotte."

And he was silent, not knowing what to reply.

The aunt now tormented them ceaselessly with the fixed idea of a child. She would push Lesable into corners and breathe in his face: "Nephew, I mean you to be a father before my death. I want to see my heir. You will never make me believe that Cora is not made to be a mother. You've only to look at her. When one gets married, nephew, it is to have a family, to have heirs. Our Holy Mother the Church forbids sterile marriages. I know very well that you are not rich and that a child brings expense. But after I have gone you will want for nothing. I want a little Lesable, I insist, do you hear!"

After fifteen months of the marriage, as her desire had not yet been realised, she began to have doubts and became pressing; and in a low voice she would give advice to Cora, practical advice, as a woman

who formerly knew many things, and could still remember when need arose.

But one morning she could not get up, feeling indisposed. As she had never been ill, Cachelin, very agitated, came to knock at his son-in-law's door: "Run quickly to Doctor Barbette's, and you will tell the Chief, won't you, that I will not be going to office to-day, in view of the circumstances."

Lesable passed a day of anguish, incapable of working, writing or examining his cases. M. Torchebeuf, surprised, asked him: "You are worried to-day, Monsieur Lesable?" And Lesable, replied nervously: "I am very tired, dear Master, I sat up the whole night with our aunt whose condition is very grave."

But the Chief replied coldly: "It should have been enough for M. Cachelin to have been with her. I cannot let my office be disorganised on account of my clerk's personal affairs."

Lesable had placed his watch in front of him on his table, and he was awaiting five o'clock with feverish impatience. As soon as the huge clock in the big courtyard struck, he fled, leaving the office at the official hour for the first time.

He even took a cab to return, his anxiety was so keen; and he went up the stairs at a run.

The maid came to open the door; he stammered: "How is she?"

"The doctor says she is very low."

His heart beat and he stood there very excited: "Really?"

Was she, by any chance, going to die?

At the moment he did not dare enter the sick

woman's room, and he sent for Cachelin who was watching over her.

His father-in-law appeared immediately, opening the door with precaution. He was wearing his dressing-gown and smoking-cap, as he did when he spent pleasant evenings by the fire; and he murmured in a low voice: "She is bad, very bad. She's been unconscious for the last four hours. They even administered the last sacrament to her in the afternoon."

Then Lesable felt a weakness descending upon his legs, and he sat down: "Where is my wife?"

"She is with her."

"What exactly does the Doctor say?"

"He says it is a stroke. She might get over it, but she might also die to-night."

"Do you need me? If you don't need me, I'd rather not go in. It will be painful to me to see her in this state."

"No. Go home. If there is anything new, I will send for you straight away."

And Lesable returned to his own apartment. The flat seemed to him changed, bigger, lighter. But, as he could not sit still, he went out on to the balcony.

It was late July, and the great sun, just as it was disappearing behind the two towers of the Trocadéro, poured a rain of fire on the great multitude of roofs.

The void, a bright red at his feet, took on tints of pale gold higher up, then yellow tints, then green tints, a pale green fretted with light, then it became blue overhead, a pure, fresh blue.

The swallows passed by like arrows, hardly visible, tracing the forked and fleeting outline of their wings against the vermillion background of the sky.

And over the infinite multitude of houses, over the distant fields, hovered a rosy cloud, a vapour of fire, into which there arose, as in an apotheosis, the belfry steeples and all the slender tops of the monuments. The Arc-de-Triomphe-de-l'Etoile appeared enormous and black in the fire of the sky, and the dome of the Invalides seemed to be another sun fallen from the firmament on to the back of a building.

Lesable held on to the railing with both hands, drank in the air as one drinks wine, with a desire to jump, cry out, make violent gestures, so overwhelmed did he feel by a profound, triumphant joy. Life seemed radiant to him, the future full of happiness! What was he going to do? And he mused.

A noise behind him made him start. It was his wife. Her eyes were red, her cheeks a little puffy and she wore a tired look. She offered her brow so that he should kiss her, and then said: "We are going to have dinner at father's to stay near her. The maid will not leave her while we are eating." And he followed her into the next flat.

Cachelin was already at the table, awaiting his daughter and son-in-law. A cold chicken, potato-salad, and a dish of strawberries were arranged on the dresser, and the soup was steaming in the plates.

They sat down. Cachelin declared: "These are the sort of times one doesn't want to have often. It is not very cheerful." He said all this with a note of indifference in his voice and a sort of satisfaction on his face. And he fell to, like a man with a healthy appetite, finding the chicken excellent and the potato-salad altogether refreshing.

But Lesable felt his stomach compressed and his soul uneasy, his ear intent upon the next room, which

remained silent as if nobody were there. Cora was not hungry either, agitated, tearful, drying an eye from time to time with the corner of her napkin.

Cachelin asked : "What did the Chief say?"

And Lesable gave the details, which his father-in-law wanted in full, and which he made him repeat, insisting on knowing everything, as if he had been away from the Ministry for a year.

"There must have been a stir when they knew that she was ill?" And he thought of his glorious return when she was dead, at the faces of his colleagues; he said, however, as if replying to a secret remorse : "It is not that I wish any harm to the dear woman ! God knows that I would like to keep her a long time, but all the same it will cause a stir. It'll make Papa Savon forget the Commune."

They were beginning to eat the strawberries when the sick woman's door was opened. The people at the table were so excited, that all three of them found that they were suddenly standing up, startled. And the little maid appeared, still preserving her calm and stupid look. She said quietly : "She has stopped breathing."

And Cachelin, throwing his napkin down on the table, rushed out like a mad man; Cora followed him, with beating heart, but Lesable stood still near the door, peeping from afar at the pale gleam of the bed, dimly lit by the dying day. He saw his father-in-law's back bent over the couch, not moving, examining; and suddenly he heard his voice which seemed to come from a distance, from very far, from the end of the world, one of those voices which come in our dreams and which tell us surprising things. It was saying : "It's over ! I can hear nothing

more." He saw his wife fall on her knees, her head on the sheet, weeping. Then he decided to go in, and, as Cachelin had straightened up, saw, on the whiteness of the pillow, the face of Aunt Charlotte, with eyes closed, so hollow, so rigid, and so pale, that she looked like an old woman of wax.

With anguish he asked : "Is it over?"

Cachelin, who was gazing at his sister, turned towards him, and they looked at each other. He replied : "Yes," wishing to force his face into a sorrowful expression, but the two men had seen through each other at a glance, and, without knowing why, instinctively, they shook hands, as if to thank each other for what they had done for each other.

Then, without wasting time, they bustled about all the tasks demanded by the dead.

Lesable took it upon himself to go for the Doctor and to do the more urgent errands as quickly as possible. He took his hat and ran downstairs, in a hurry to be out in the street, to be alone to breathe, to think, to enjoy his happiness by himself.

When he had finished his errands, instead of returning he went out on to the boulevard, urged by the desire to see people, to mingle in the whirl, the happy life of the evening. He wanted to cry out to the passers-by : "I have an income of fifty thousand pounds!" and he went along, his hands in his pockets, stopping in front of the shop windows, eying the rich materials, the jewels, the luxury furniture with the happy thought : "I can afford that now."

All at once he passed in front of an undertaker's shop, and a sudden thought came to him : "What if she wasn't dead? What if they were mistaken?"

And he returned to his house with a quicker step.

this doubt hovering in his mind.

On returning he asked : "Has the Doctor come?"

Cachelin replied : "Yes. He has verified the decease, and he will make out the certificate."

They went back into the dead woman's room. Cora was still crying, sitting in an arm-chair. She was crying very quietly, with no difficulty, almost without grief now, with that facility for tears which women have.

As soon as they were all three in the flat, Cachelin said in a low voice : "Now that the maid has gone off, we can look and see if there is anything hidden in the furniture."

And the two men set to work. They emptied out drawers, rummaged in pockets, unfolded the most insignificant papers. At midnight they had found nothing of any interest. Cora had dropped off, and she was snoring a little, in a regular fashion. César asked : "Are we going to stay here until day-time?" Lesable, perplexed, thought that that would be more proper. Then the father-in-law made up his mind : "In that case," he said, "let's get arm-chairs ;" and they went to fetch the other two padded chairs which furnished the young couple's room.

An hour later, the three relatives were sleeping with uneven snores, in front of the icy corpse in its eternal immobility.

They awoke at daybreak, just as the little maid was coming into the room. Cachelin, rubbing his eyelids, immediately confessed : "I must have dozed off a little about half an hour ago."

But Lesable, who had immediately regained possession of himself, declared : "Yes, I noticed it. I did not lose consciousness for a second; I had

only closed my eyes to rest them."

Cora returned to her own apartment.

Then Lesable asked with apparent indifference : "When would you like us to go to the solicitor's to find out about the will ?

"—Why? . . . this morning, if you like."

"—Is it necessary for Cora to come with us?"

"—Perhaps it would be better, since she is the heiress, really."

"—In that case, I'll go and tell her to get ready."

And Lesable went out with his brisk step.

Master Belhomme's chambers had just opened when Cachelin, Lesable and his wife presented themselves, in deep mourning, with downcast faces.

The solicitor received them immediately and sat them down. Cachelin began to speak : "You know me, Monsieur : I am the brother of Mlle. Charlotte Cachelin. This is my daughter and my son-in-law. My poor sister died yesterday ; we shall be burying her to-morrow. As you are the trustee of her will, we have come to ask you if she expressed any wish regarding her funeral, or if you have any communication to make to us."

The solicitor opened a drawer, took out an envelope, tore it open, drew out a paper, and declared : "This, Monsieur, is a duplicate of the will in question, with which I can acquaint you immediately.

"The other copy, exactly similar to this, must remain in my hands." And he read :

"I, the undersigned, Victorine-Charlotte Cachelin, herewith express my last wishes : 'I leave all my property, amounting to about a million and a hundred-and-twenty thousand francs, to the children who are born of the marriage of my niece Céleste-

Coralie Cachelin, with enjoyment of the income by the parents until the majority of the eldest of the descendants.

“ The provisions which follow determine the share falling to each child and the share remaining to the parents until the end of their days.

“ In the event of my death occurring before my niece has an heir, all my property will remain in the hands of my solicitor, for three years, for my above-mentioned wish to be carried out, if a child is born during this period.

“ But in the event of Coralie not being blessed by Heaven with an offspring during the three years which follow my death, my property will be distributed, under the supervision of my solicitor, to the poor and to the benevolent institutions the list of which follows.”

There followed an interminable series of names and societies, figures, directions and recommendations.

Then Master Belhomme politely delivered the document into the hands of Cachelin, who was stunned with horror.

The solicitor thought he also ought to add some explanation: “Mlle. Cachelin,” he said, “when she did me the honour of speaking to me for the first time about her intention of making her will in this way, she expressed to me the great desire she had to see a descendant of her race. She replied to all my reasonings with the more and more precise expression of her will, which was based, moreover, on a religious sentiment, any sterile union, so she thought, being the sign of a Divine curse. I was unable to modify her intentions in anything. Be-

lieve me that I very deeply regret it." Then he added, smiling at Coralie : "I do not doubt that the 'desideratum' of the deceased will be realized very quickly."

And the three relatives went away, too bewildered to think of anything.

They walked back to their home, side by side, without speaking, shamefaced and furious, as if they had robbed each other. All Cora's grief, even, had suddenly vanished, her aunt's ingratitude exempting her from the need to mourn her. At last Lesable, whose pale lips were tightly compressed by a contraction of spite, said to his father-in-law : "Just hand me that document so that I can see with my own eyes what is written." Cachelin handed him the paper and the young man began to read. He had halted on the pavement, and he stood there, jostled by the passers-by, searching the words with his piercing, practical eye. The other two waited for him, two steps ahead, still speechless.

Then he handed back the will, declaring : "There's nothing to do about it. She's swindled us nicely!"

Cachelin, angered by the routing of his hopes, replied : "Confound it ! it's up to you to have a child. You knew very well that she was wanting one a long time."

Lesable shrugged his shoulders without replying.

On their return they found a crowd of people waiting for them, those people whose occupations are concerned with the dead. Lesable returned to his own flat, wanting to have nothing more to do with anything, and César was rude to everyone, protesting that he should be left in peace, asking them to finish

with all this business as soon as possible, and finding that they were a long time getting rid of this corpse for him.

Cora, shut up in her room, did not make a sound. But Cachelin, at the end of an hour, went to knock at his son-in-law's door : "I have come," he said, "my dear Léopold, to lay a few thoughts before you, for, after all, we must understand each other. My advice is to give her a proper funeral, all the same, in order not to raise the alarm at the Ministry. We'll manage about the expense as best we can. Besides, nothing is hopeless. You haven't been married for long ; and it would take very bad luck for you not to have children. You must set about it, that's all. Get down to it, as quickly as you can. Will you take it upon yourself to go along to the Ministry soon ? I am going to write the addresses of the funeral-letters."

Lesable sourly agreed that his father-in-law was right, and they installed themselves, face to face, at the two ends of a long table, to make out the addresses on the black-bordered cards.

Then they had lunch. Cora reappeared, indifferent, as if none of all this had anything to do with her, and she ate a lot, having had nothing the evening before.

As soon as the meal was over, she returned to her room. Lesable went out to go to the Ministry, and Cachelin settled down on his balcony to smoke a pipe, sitting astride a chair. The heavy sun of a summer's day was beating straight down on the multitude of roofs, some of which, furnished with sky-lights, shone like fire, and threw out dazzling rays at which the eyes could not bear to look.

And Cachelin, in shirt sleeves, his eyes blinking in this stream of light, looked at the green hills, down there, in the distance, behind the great city, behind the dusty suburbs. He mused that the Seine was flowing along, broad, calm and fresh, at the foot of these hills, which have trees on their slopes, and that one would be enormously better off under the shade of the trees, lying on one's stomach on the grass, right on the river's edge, spitting into the water, than on the burning lead of his terrace. And he was oppressed by an uneasy feeling, the harrowing thought, the painful sensation of their disaster, that unexpected misfortune, all the more bitter and harsh inasmuch as the hope was keener and longer; and he said out loud, as one does when one has great troubles of the mind, when one is obsessed with fixed ideas: "Bitch!"

Behind him, in the bed-room, he could hear the movements of the undertaker's men, and the incessant noise of the hammer nailing up the coffin. He had not seen his sister again since his visit to the solicitor.

But gradually the warmth, the gaiety, the bright charm of this magnificent summer's day crept into his body and soul, and he reflected that everything was not hopeless. For why should his daughter not have a child? She had not yet been married two years! His son-in-law seemed vigorous, well-built and healthy, although small. They would have a child, by Jove! Besides, they must!

Lesable had gone into the Ministry stealthily and had slipped into his office. He found on his table a note with the words: "The Chief wants you." At first he made a gesture of impatience, feeling a

revolt against this despotism which was about to fall on his back again, then he was spurred on by a sudden, violent desire to succeed. He would be Chief in his turn, and soon ; he would go still further.

Without taking off his street-coat, he repaired to M. Torchebeuf's. He presented himself with one of those broken-hearted faces that one adopts for sad occasions, and something more even, sign of real and profound grief, that involuntary despondency which great sorrows stamp upon the features.

The Chief's big head, still bent over papers, straightened up, and he asked in a sharp voice : "I needed you the whole morning. Why didn't you come ?" Lesable replied : "Dear master, we have had the misfortune to lose my aunt, Mlle. Cachelin, and I was just coming to ask you to attend the funeral, which will take place to-morrow."

M. Torchebeuf's face had immediately cleared up. And he replied with a shade of consideration : "In that case, my dear friend, it's different. I thank you and leave you free, for you must have a lot to do."

But Lesable was set on showing himself to be zealous : "Thank you, dear master, everything is finished and I intend staying here until the official hour."

And he went back to his room.

The news had spread, and from all the offices they came to offer him congratulations rather than condolence, and also to see how he was taking it. He endured the remarks and the looks with an actor's resigned mask, and a tact which surprised people. "He's very much on his guard," said some. And the others added : "Yes, but never mind, at heart

he must be mighty pleased."

Maze, bolder than everyone else, asked him, in his off-hand, man-of-the-world's way : "Do you know the exact amount of the fortune?"

Lesable replied in a voice of perfect disinterestedness : "No, not exactly. The will says about twelve hundred thousand francs. I know that because the solicitor had to acquaint us, straightway, with certain clauses relating to the funeral."

The general opinion was that Lesable would not remain at the Ministry. One doesn't stay a pen-pushers with an income of sixty thousand pounds. One is Somebody; one can become anything one likes. Some thought he would aim at the Council of State; others believed he had the Chamber of Deputies in mind. The Chief was waiting to receive his resignation to hand it on to the Director.

The whole Ministry came to the funeral, which they found meagre. But a rumour ran round : "It was Mlle. Cachelin herself who wanted it like this. It was in the will."

Cachelin took up his work again from the next day, and Lesable, after a week's indisposition, came back in his turn, grown a little pale, but assiduous and zealous as before. One might have said that nothing had happened to their lives. It was only noticed that they ostentatiously smoked fat cigars, that they would talk about income, railways, and capital values, as men who have title-deeds in their pockets, and after some time it became known that they had rented a country-house in the environs of Paris, to spend the rest of the summer there.

Everyone thought : "They are miserly like the old woman; it must run in the family; birds of a

feather flock together; still, it isn't the right thing to do to stay at the Ministry with such a fortune."

After some time no one thought about it any more. They had been judged and classified.

IV

Walking in Aunt Charlotte's funeral procession, Lesable thought about the million, and, eaten up by fury which was all the more violent because it had to remain secret, he bore a grudge against everybody for his deplorable misfortune.

He also asked himself: "Why have I had no child during the two years I have been married?" And the fear of seeing his married life stay barren set his heart beating.

Then, like the urchin at the fair who looks up the tall, shining, greasy-pole at the mug which must be brought down, and who swears to himself that he will get there, by sheer energy and will-power, and that he will have the necessary vigour and tenacity, Lesable made the desperate resolve to be a father. So many other people were, why shouldn't he be one too? Perhaps he had been neglectful, careless ignorant of something, as a result of complete indifference. Having never felt the violent desire to leave behind an heir, he had never concentrated all his attention on obtaining this result. Henceforward he would make desperate efforts with this end in view; he would overlook nothing, and he would succeed because he wanted it so.

But when he reached home, he felt unwell, and had to take to his bed. The disillusionment had been

too much of a shock, and he was suffering from the reaction.

The doctor thought his condition serious enough to prescribe complete rest, and he would even have to go carefully for some time afterwards. They feared cerebral fever.

In a week, however, he was up, and he resumed his duties at the Ministry.

But, still feeling himself to be poorly, he did not dare approach the conjugal couch. He hesitated and trembled, like a general about to give battle, a battle on which depended his future. And every evening he would wait for the next day, hoping for one of those hours of healthiness, well-being and energy, when one feels capable of anything. Every moment he would feel his pulse, and, finding it too feeble or quick, he would take tonics, eat raw meat, and go for long, strengthening walks before returning home.

As he was not getting better as he would like, he thought of ending the warm season in the outskirts of Paris. And soon the conviction came to him that the open air of the country would have a sovereign influence on his constitution. In his predicament, the country has marvellous, decisive effects. He was reassured by that certainty of future success, and he repeated to his father-in-law, with innuendoes in his voice : "When we are in the country I shall feel better and everything will be all right."

The word "country," by itself, seemed to him to admit of a mysterious connotation.

So they rented a little house in the village of Bezons, and the three of them went to stay there. Every morning the two men left on foot, across the fields, for the Gare de Colombes, and came back every even-

ing on foot.

Cora, enchanted at living thus by the edge of the gentle river, would go and sit on the banks, pick flowers and bring back huge bunches of fine grasses, golden and frail.

Every evening they would all three go for a walk along the bank as far as the La Morue Weir, and they would go into the Restaurant des Tilleuls to drink a bottle of beer. The river, checked by the long row of stakes, rushed between the joints, leapt, bubbled and foamed over a stretch of a hundred yards; and the booming of the waterfall made the earth tremble, whilst a fine haze, a wet mist, hovered in the air, rising from the cascade like thin steam, and spreading abroad the smell of threshing water and the savour of churned-up mud.

Night fell. In the distance, facing them, a great gleam indicated Paris, and made Cachelin repeat every evening: "Ah! what a city all the same." From time to time a train, passing over the bridge which cuts over the end of the island, made a noise like thunder, and soon disappeared, either to the left, or to the right, towards Paris or towards the sea.

They returned with slow steps, watching the moon rise, sitting on a low wall so that they could go on watching its soft, yellow light falling on the peaceful river, seeming to flow along with the water, the ripples of the current stirring it like fiery, watered silk. The toads uttered their short, metallic cries. Night-birds' calls filled the air. And sometimes a great, silent, shadow glided down the river, disturbing its luminous, calm flow. It was a poachers' boat: they suddenly threw out their casting-net and noiselessly hauled in to their boat, in the huge, dark

net, their catch of shining, quivering gudgeon, like a treasure drawn up from the depths of the water, a living treasure of silver fish.

Cora, deeply moved, leaned tenderly on the arm of her husband, whose intentions she had guessed, although they had discussed nothing. For them it was like the days of their engagement all over again, a second waiting for the love embrace. Sometimes he would give her a furtive kiss near her ear, on the edge of the nape, on that charming piece of tender flesh, where the first hairs curl. She would reply with a squeeze of the hand: and they wanted each other, each still refusing the other, impelled and restrained by a stronger desire, by the ghost of the million.

Cachelin, lulled by the hope he felt around him, lived a happy life, drank hard and ate a lot, feeling poetic urges rising in him, in the twilight, that foolish sensibility which comes to the dullest people at the sight of certain scenes in the country: a rain of light through the branches, a sunset on the distant hills, with purple reflexions on the river. And he declared: "When I see this sort of thing, I really believe in God. It catches me there," — and he pointed to the pit of his stomach, — "and I feel all turned inside out. I go all queer. I seem to have been steeped in a bath, which has filled me with a desire to cry."

Lesable, meanwhile, was better, and felt himself seized by ardours which he no longer recognized, urges to run about like a young colt, to roll in the grass and utter cries of joy.

He thought the time had come. It was a real wedding-night.

Then they had a honeymoon, full of caresses and hopes.

Then they saw that their attempts remained fruitless and that their confidence was in vain.

It was a hopeless disaster. But Lesable did not lose courage, and persisted with superhuman efforts. His wife, agitated by the same desire, and trembling from the same fear, more robust than he was too, lent herself to his attempts with good grace, called forth his caresses, and ceaselessly aroused his failing ardour.

They returned to Paris in early October.

Life became difficult for them. They now had unkind words on their lips; and Cachelin, who detected the state of affairs, tormented them with old soldiers' stories envenomed and coarse.

And an incessant thought pursued them, undermined them, spurred on their mutual rancour, the thought of the unattainable inheritance. Cora now took on a haughty tone, and spoke harshly to her husband. She treated him as a little boy, a chit, a man of little importance. And Cachelin would repeat, every dinner-time: "If I had been rich, I'd have had a lot of children—when one is poor, one has to know how to be moderate." And, turning to his daughter, he would add: "You, you must be like me, but that—." And he would cast a significant glance at his son-in-law, accompanied by a movement of his shoulders that was full of contempt.

Lesable said nothing, as the superior type who has fallen among a family of boors. At the Ministry they thought he looked seedy. Even the Chief asked him one day: "Are you sure you are not ill? You seem a little changed to me."

He replied: "Of course not, dear master. I'm tired perhaps. I've been working hard for some-time, as you might have seen."

He was counting on getting his promotion at the end of the year, and, with this hope in mind, he had resumed the hard-working life of the model clerk.

He received only a bonus of next to nothing, less than all the others.

Lesable, heart-stricken, went to find the Chief again, and for the first time called him, "Monsieur."—"What is the use then, Monsieur, of my working as I do, if I get no reward?"

M. Torchebeuf's broad face seemed ruffled: "I have already told you, Monsieur Lesable, that I do not allow discussions of this nature between us. I repeat to you again that I think your complaint unseemly, considering your present wealth compared with the poverty of your colleagues. . . ."

Lesable could not contain himself: "But I've got nothing, Monsieur! Our aunt left her property to the first child born of our marriage. My father-in-law and I are living on our salaries."

Surprised, the Chief replied: "If you have nothing just now, you will be rich, in any case, on the first opportunity. So it comes to the same thing."

And Lesable withdrew, more cast down by his lost promotion than by the impregnable inheritance.

But, a few days later, when Cachelin had just arrived in his office, the handsome Maze entered with a smile on his lips, then Pitolet appeared, his eyes twinkling, then Boissel pushed open the door and came in with an excited look, sneering and

casting knowing looks at the others. Papa Savon was still copying, his clay pipe in the corner of his mouth, sitting on his high chair, his two feet on the bar, in the fashion of little boys.

No one said anything. They seemed to be waiting for something, and Cachelin was registering the documents, proclaiming aloud, as was his custom : "Toulon. Supplies of officers' mess-tins for the *Richelieu*.—Lorient. Life-jackets for the *Desaix*.—Brest. Samples of sail-cloth of English make!"

Lesable appeared. He came now every morning to look for the work which concerned him, his father-in-law no longer taking the trouble to have it sent to him by the office-boy.

While he was rummaging about the papers spread out on the registering-clerk's desk, Maze was looking at him out of the corner of his eye and rubbing his hands, and Pitolet, who was rolling a cigarette, had little wrinkles of amusement on his lips, signs of the merriment that can no longer contain itself. He turned to the copying-clerk : "I say, Papa Savon, you've learnt a lot of things in your life, haven't you?"

The old man, thinking that they were going to make fun of him and talk about his wife again, did not reply.

Pitolet continued : "You must always have found the secret of producing children, anyway, since you have had several?"

The old fellow lifted his head : "You know, Monsieur Pitolet, that I don't like jokes on this subject. I had the misfortune to marry an unworthy companion. When I received proof of her infidelity I separated from her."

Maze asked in an indifferent tone, without laughing: "You had the proof several times, didn't you?" And Papa Savon gravely answered: "Yes, Monsieur."

Pitolet began again: "That doesn't prevent you from being the father of several children, three or four, so they tell me?"

The old fellow, who had become very red, stammered: "You are trying to offend me, Monsieur Pitolet; but you won't succeed. Yes, my wife has had three children. I have reason to assume that the first is mine, but I deny the other two."

Pitolet continued: "Everyone says, then, that the first is yours. That's enough. It is very fine to have a child, very fine and very fortunate. Listen, I bet Lesable would be delighted to produce one, just one, as you did?"

Cachelin had stopped registering. He was not laughing, although Papa Savon was his usual butt, and he had exhausted on him the series of improper jokes on the subject of conjugal misfortunes.

Lesable had picked up his papers; but, realising that they were attacking him, he wanted to stay, held back by pride, confused and angry, and trying to think who could have betrayed his secret to them. Then the remembrance of what he had said to the Chief came back to him, and he immediately realised that he would have to show a lot of energy straight away, if he did not want to serve as a laughing-stock to the whole Ministry.

Boissel was walking up and down, still sneering. He imitated the hoarse voice of a street-hawker and bellowed: "The secret for producing children, ten centimes, two sous! Ask for the secret of producing

children, revealed by M. Savon, with all the horrible details !”

Every one began to laugh, save Lesable and his father-in-law. And Pitolet, turning to the registering-clerk said : “What on earth is the matter with you, Cachelin? I don’t recognize your usual high spirits ! One would believe that you don’t think it’s funny that Papa Savon had a child of his wife. I think it’s very amusing. Not everybody can do as much !”

Lesable had began to turn over some papers, pretending that he was reading and that he had heard nothing, but he had turned pale.

Boissel continued in the same street Arab’s voice : “Useful to heirs to collect inheritances, ten centimes, two sous, ask for it !”

Then Maze, who looked down on this brand of humour, and who had a personal grudge against Lesable for having robbed him of his hope of the fortune, which he had nourished at the bottom of his heart, asked him point-blank : “What’s the matter with you, Lesable, you are very pale?”

Lesable raised his head and looked his colleague full in the face. He hesitated for a few seconds, his lips quivering, casting about for something cutting and witty to say, but finding nothing to his liking, he replied : “There’s nothing the matter with me. I’m only surprised to see you showing so much finesse.”

Maze, still with his back to the fire and lifting up the tails of his frock-coat with both hands, replied with a laugh : “One does what one can, my dear fellow. We are like you, we don’t always succeed. . .”

Roars of laughter cut him short. Papa Savon, as-

tonished, vaguely realising that he was no longer being addressed, that they were not making fun of him, sat there, open-mouthed, his pen in the air. And Cachelin was waiting, ready to fall upon the first person singled out by chance.

Lesable stammered : "I don't understand. In what have I not succeeded?"

The good-looking Maze let one of his coat-tails fall, to curl his moustache, and said in a pleasant, courteous tone : "I know that you usually succeed in everything you undertake. So I was wrong to bring you in. Besides, it was about Papa Savon's children and not yours, as you haven't got any. And since you succeed in all your enterprises, it is obvious that if you haven't any children, it is because you didn't want any."

Lesable asked rudely : "What business is that of yours?"

Confronted by this provoking tone, Maze raised his voice in his turn : "I say, what's biting you? Try to be polite or you'll have to deal with me!"

But Lesable was trembling with anger, and, losing all control, he cried : "Monsieur Maze, I am not, like you, a great dandy, nor a great swell. And I beg you never to speak to me again. I do not care for you or your like." And he hurled a look of defiance at Pitolet and Boissel.

Maze had suddenly realised that real strength lies in calm and irony ; but, wounded in all his vanities, he wanted to strike at the heart of his enemy, and he replied, in a patronising tone, the tone of a benevolent counsellor, with fury in his eyes : "My dear Lesable, you've gone a bit too far. Of course I understand your vexation ; it is annoying to lose a

fortune, and to lose it for so little, for such a simple, little thing—. Listen, if you like, I'll do you that service for nothing, as a good friend. It's only a business of five minutes—."

He was still speaking when he received Papa Savon's ink-pot, which Lesable had thrown at him, full in his chest. A flood of ink spread over his face, transforming him into a negro with surprising rapidity. He rushed forward, rolling white eyes, his hand raised to strike. But Cachelin screened his son-in-law, and seizing the tall Maze round the waist, pushing him, shaking him and belabouring him, he threw him back against the wall. Maze tore himself free with a violent effort, opened the door, and cried to the two men : "You are going to hear from me !" and he disappeared.

Pitolet and Boissel followed him. Boissel explained his restraint by the fear he had had of killing someone if he had taken part in the fight.

No sooner had he returned to his office, than Maze tried to clean himself, but he had no success ; he was dyed with purple ink, supposed to be quite indelible. He stood in front of the mirror, enraged and in despair, rubbing his face furiously with his handkerchief rolled up into a ball. The only result was a richer black, tinted with red, the blood rushing to the skin.

Boissel and Pitolet had followed him and were giving him advice. According to the former, he should wash his face with pure olive oil ; according to the latter he would get it off with ammonia. The office-boy was sent to ask the advice of a chemist. He brought back a yellow liquid and a piece of pumice-stone. It made no difference.

Maze sat down, discouraged, and declared : "Now there remains the question of honour to be settled. Will you act as my seconds and go and ask M. Lesable, either for adequate apologies, or for satisfaction with weapons ?"

They both consented and began to discuss the procedure to be followed. They had no knowledge of this kind of affair, but did not want to admit it, and, preoccupied by the desire to be correct, they expressed timid and varied opinions. It was decided that they would consult a frigate-captain drafted to the Ministry to look after the coal department. He knew no more about it than they did. After having reflected, he advised them nevertheless to go and find Lesable, and ask him to put them in touch with two friends.

As they were making their way to their colleague's office, Boissel suddenly stopped : "Won't it be essential to have gloves ?"

Pitolet hesitated for a second : "Yes, perhaps so." But to get gloves, they would have to go out, and the Chief wasn't in a good mood. So they sent the office-boy again to fetch an assortment from a shop. The colour made them hesitate a long time. Boissel wanted black ones, Pitolet thought this colour out of place in the circumstances. They chose purple ones.

Seeing the two men come in, gloved and solemn, Lesable raised his head and asked abruptly : "What do you want ?"

Pitolet replied : "Monsieur, we have been entrusted by our friend M. Maze to demand of you, either your apologies, or satisfaction with weapons, for the assault you have just made on him."

But Lesable, still exasperated, cried : "What ! he

insults me and now comes to challenge me? Tell him I despise him, that I despise anything he may say or do."

Boissel stepped forward in tragic style: "You are going to force us, Monsieur, to publish a statement in the newspapers which will be very unpleasant for you."

Pitolet added, slyly: "And which might do grave injury to your honour and your future advancement."

Lesable looked at them, overwhelmed. What was he to do? He thought of gaining time: "Gentlemen, you will have my answer in ten minutes. Will you wait in M. Pitolet's office?"

As soon as he was alone, he looked around him, as if to seek advice, support.

A duel! He was going to have a duel!

He sat there, trembling, terrified, a man of peaceable habits who had never dreamed of this possibility, who had not prepared himself for these risks, these excitements, who had not fortified his courage in anticipation of this dreadful event. He wanted to get up, and collapsed into his chair again, his heart beating, his legs like water. His anger, his strength had suddenly disappeared. But the thought of the Ministry's verdict, and the sensation the affair was going to cause throughout the offices, awoke his flagging pride, and, not knowing what to decide, he went to the Chief to ask his advice.

M. Torchebeuf was surprised and remained perplexed. The necessity for an armed encounter did not occur to him; and he thought that all this was going to disorganise his department again. He repeated: "I can't say anything. This is a question of honour which does not concern me. Would you

like me to give you a note for Commandant Bouc? He's a man well up in these matters and he will be able to guide you."

Lesable consented and went off to find the Commandant who even agreed to be his second; he chose a chief-assistant as his companion.

Boissel and Pitolet were waiting for them, still wearing their gloves. They had borrowed two chairs from a nearby office in order to have seats for four.

They bowed to each other gravely, and sat down. Pitolet began to speak and outlined the state of affairs. After listening to him, the Commandant replied: "The affair is grave, but does not seem to me irreparable; it all depends on the intentions." He was a sly old sailor who was enjoying himself.

And a long discussion began, in which four successive drafts of letters were worked out, the apologies having to be reciprocal. If M. Maze acknowledged that he had no intention of offending M. Lesable, in principle, the latter would hasten to admit his entire wrong in throwing the ink-pot, and would apologise for his inconsiderate violence.

And the four envoys returned to their principals.

Maze, now sitting at his table, disturbed at the thought of the possible duel, although expecting to see his adversary withdraw, was looking at each of his cheeks in succession in one of those little, round mirrors of tin, which all the clerks kept hidden in their drawer, to tidy beard, hair and tie, before leaving in the evening.

He read the letters they submitted to him and declared with obvious satisfaction: "That seems to me very honourable. I am ready to sign."

Lesable, for his part, had accepted the seconds'

drafts without discussion, declaring: "Since that is your advice, I can only comply."

And the four plenipotentiaries met again. The letters were exchanged; they bowed gravely, and, the incident settled, they separated.

Extraordinary excitement reigned throughout the Department. The clerks went round for news, passed from one door to the other, accosted each other in the corridors.

When they heard that the affair had been settled, there was general disappointment. Someone said: "It still doesn't give Lesable a child." And the saying went round. One clerk rhymed a ditty.

But, just when everything seemed over, a difficulty arose, brought up by Boissel: "What should be the attitude of the two adversaries when they find themselves face to face? Should they bow? Should they pretend not to know each other?" It was decided that they should meet, as if by chance, in the Chief's office, and that they should exchange a few polite words in the presence of M. Torchebeuf.

This ceremony was carried out immediately; and Maze, having sent for a cab, went home to try to clean his face.

Lesable and Cachelin went back together, without speaking, exasperated with each other, as if the blame for what had just happened lay on one or the other. As soon as he got home, Lesable threw his hat violently on to the chest of drawers, and shouted to his wife:

"I've had enough. I've got a duel to fight now, through you!"

She looked at him, surprised, angry already.

"A duel? How's that?"

"Because Maze insulted me about you."

She drew nearer: "About me? How?"

He had sat down furiously in an armchair. He continued: "He insulted me. . . I don't need to tell you any more."

But she wanted to know: "I insist on your repeating the remarks he made about me."

Lesable flushed, then stammered: "He told me. . . he told me. . . It was about your barrenness."

She started; then a rage possessed her, and, the coarseness of her father piercing through her woman's nature, she burst out: "Me! I'm barren, am I? And what does he know about it, the lout? Barren with you, yes, because you are not a man! But if I had married anyone, it doesn't matter who, do you hear, I would have had children. Ah! I'll teach you better manners! It's cost me dear to have married a rag like you!—And what did you reply to this wretch?"

Lesable, bewildered before this outburst, stammered: "I. . . I. . . slapped his face."

She looked at him, astonished: "And what did he do?"

"—He sent me his seconds. That's all."

She was interested now in this quarrel, drawn, like all women, towards dramatic events, and she asked, suddenly softened, unexpectedly seized by a certain esteem for this man who was going to risk his life: "When do you fight?"

He replied calmly: "We are not fighting; the affair has been settled by the seconds. Maze has given me his apologies."

She stared at him, beside herself with contempt: "Ah! I'm insulted in front of you, and you let it

pass, and you don't fight. To crown everything you are a coward!"

He was roused: "I forbid you to say anything more! I know what concerns my honour better than you do. Besides, here is M. Maze's letter. Look, read it and see for yourself."

She took the paper, glanced over it, guessed everything and sneered: "You wrote a letter too, didn't you? You were afraid of each other. Oh! how cowardly men are! If we were in your place, we women. . . . Anyway it was I who was insulted in this, I, your wife, and you are satisfied with this! It no longer surprises me that you aren't capable of having a child. It all holds together. You're as . . . as . . . flabby before women as you are before men! Ah! I've married a pretty little fellow!"

She had suddenly hit upon the voice and gestures of Cachelin, vulgar, old soldier's gestures and the intonations of a man.

Standing in front of him, hands on hips, tall, strong and vigorous, her breast rounded, her face red, her voice deep and vibrant, the blood colouring her fresh, handsome woman's cheeks, she looked at this pale man sitting in front of her, slightly bald, clean-shaven, with his short, lawyer's side-whiskers. She wanted to strangle him, crush him.

And she repeated: "You are fit for nothing, nothing. You even let everyone trample on your toes in your job!"

The door opened; Cachelin appeared, drawn by the noise of the voices, and he asked: "What's the matter?"

She turned round: "I'm giving this poor fish a

piece of my mind!"

And Lesable, raising his eyes, noticed their resemblance. It seemed to him that a veil had been lifted which showed them as they really were, the father and the daughter, of the same blood, the same vulgar, coarse stock. He saw himself ruined, condemned to live between these two, for ever.

Cachelin declared: "It's not pleasant to have married a capon."

Lesable leapt up, trembling with fury, exploding at this word. He walked towards his father-in-law spluttering: "Get out of here! . . . Get out! . . . You are in my house, do you hear? . . . I'm kicking you out." . . . And from the dresser he seized a bottle full of tonic-water which he brandished like a club.

Cachelin, intimidated, backed out, murmuring: "What's up with him now?"

But Lesable's anger did not subside; this was too much. He turned to his wife, who was still looking at him, a little astonished at his violence, and, after putting down his bottle on the dresser, he cried: "As for you . . . as for you . . ." But since he could find nothing to say, having no arguments to offer, he stood facing her, his features distorted, his voice transformed.

She began to laugh.

In the presence of this mirth, which was another insult to him, he became mad, and, rushing forward, he seized her by the neck with his left hand, whilst he slapped her furiously with his right. She recoiled, bewildered and suffocating. She hit against the bed and fell backwards on to it. He did not let her go and kept on hitting her. All at once he straightened

up, out of breath and exhausted; and suddenly ashamed of his brutality, he stammered: "That's . . . that's how it is."

But she did not stir, as if he had killed her. She remained lying on her back, on the edge of the bed, her face hidden now in her two hands. He drew near, uneasy, wondering what was going to happen, and waiting for her to uncover her face to see what was going on inside her. After a few minutes, his anguish growing, he murmured: "Cora! say something. Cora!" She did not answer and did not stir. What was the matter with her? What was she doing? What, above all, was she going to do?

His anger having passed, subsiding as quickly as it had been roused, he felt that he was odious, almost criminal. He had beaten a woman, his wife, he, the man of steady, sober habits, well brought up and always reasonable. And, in the tenderness, of the reaction, he wanted to ask forgiveness, to go down on his knees, to kiss this bruised and reddened cheek. With his finger-tip he gently touched one of the hands spread over the invisible face. She seemed to feel nothing. He patted her, stroked her as one strokes a chidden dog. She took no notice. He said again: "Cora, listen, Cora, I did wrong, listen." She seemed to be dead. Then he tried to remove her hand. She let it go easily and he saw an open eye looking at him, a steady eye, disturbing and alarming.

He continued: "Listen, Cora, I let myself be carried away. It was your father who drove me to it. You don't insult a man like that."

She said nothing in reply, as if she had not heard. He did not know what to say or what to do. He kis-

sed her near the ear, and, as he stood up, he saw a tear in the corner of her eye, a big tear which came away and rolled quickly down her cheek; and the eyelid twitched, opening and closing in quick succession.

He was stricken with grief, pierced with emotion, and, opening his arms, he lay upon his wife; he put the other hand aside with his lips, and kissing her whole face, he begged her: "My poor Cora, forgive me, say that you forgive me."

She was crying all the time, noiselessly, without sobbing, as one cries in deep sorrow.

He held her clasped to him, caressing her, murmuring in her ear all the tender words he could find. But she remained insensible. They stayed like this a long time, stretched out and entwined.

Night came, filling the little room with shadow; and, when it was quite dark, he grew bolder and begged her forgiveness in such a way as to revive their hopes.

When they got up again, he had resumed his ordinary voice and appearance, as if nothing had happened. She, on the contrary, seemed affectionate, spoke in a gentler voice than usual, and looked at her husband with submissive, almost fawning eyes, as if this unexpected chastisement had relaxed her nerves and softened her heart. He said quietly: "Your father must be finding it dull, all alone in his flat; you'd better go and fetch him. Besides it must be time for dinner." She went out.

It was indeed seven o'clock and the little maid announced that soup was ready; then Cachelin, calm and smiling, reappeared with his daughter. They sat down to table and they chatted, that evening,

with more cordiality than they had shown for a long time, as if something fortunate had happened to every one.

V

But their constantly cherished and constantly revived hopes never came to anything. From month to month their disappointed expectations, despite Lesable's persistence and his consort's willingness, made them feverish with anxiety. Each ceaselessly reproached the other for their lack of success, and the desperate husband, emaciated and exhausted, had above all to bear with the coarseness of Cachelin, who, in their warring intimacy, no longer called him anything but Mr. Cock, doubtless in remembrance of that day when he had nearly received a bottle in his face for having used the word Capon.

He and his daughter, united by instinct, maddened by the constant thought of that huge fortune so near to them and yet so impossible to grasp, could not contrive enough to humiliate and torture this impotent, from whom their misfortune sprang.

Sitting down to table every day, Cora would repeat: "We haven't got much for dinner. It would be different if we were rich. It's not my fault."

When Lesable left for his office, she would cry out from inside her room: "Take your umbrella so that you don't come back as dirty as a bus-wheel. After all, it's not my fault that you still have to do this pen-pusher's job."

When she was about to go out herself, she never failed to exclaim: "To think that if I had married

another man I'd have had a carriage to myself."

At every hour, on every occasion, she would brood on this, sting her husband with a reproach, lash him with an insult, make him solely to blame, make him solely responsible for the loss of this money which she could have possessed.

One evening at last, losing his patience again, he cried: "For God's sake will you shut up? To begin with it's your fault, yours alone, do you hear, if we haven't a child, because I've got one, I have . . ."

He was lying, preferring anything to this eternal reproach, to this shame of appearing impotent.

She looked at him, astonished at first, seeking the truth in his eyes, then, understanding, and full of disdain: "So you've got a child, have you?"

He brazenly replied: "An illegitimate child I'm having brought up in Asnières."

She replied with calm: "We'll go and see him to-morrow so that I can see for myself what he looks like."

But he flushed to his ears, stammering: "Just as you like."

She got up the next morning as early as seven o'clock, and, as he was surprised, she said: "But aren't we going to see your child? You promised me yesterday evening. Have you, by any chance, no longer got one to-day?"

He got out of bed hurriedly: "It's not my child we'll go and see, but a doctor; and he'll give you the truth."

She replied, like a woman who is sure of herself: "I ask for nothing better."

Cachelin took it upon himself to inform the Minis-

try that his son-in-law was ill; and the Lesable family, following the advice of a local doctor, at one o'clock precisely, were ringing at the door of Doctor Lefilleul, author of several works on the hygienes of generation.

They entered a waiting-room, decorated in white and gold, badly furnished, and seeming bare and uninhabited despite the number of chairs. They sat down. Lesable felt himself trembling, anxious, and also ashamed. Their turn came and they were received by a short, stout man, cold and precise.

He waited for them to explain; but Lesable, red to the ears, did not dare. His wife then made up her mind, and, in a calm voice, like a person resolved to face anything to achieve her aim, said: "Monsieur, we have come to see you because we have no children. A large fortune for us depends on it."

The consultation was long, circumstantial and laborious. Cora alone did not seem uncomfortable and submitted to the doctor's careful examination like a woman who is animated and sustained by a higher interest.

After examining the married couple for nearly an hour, the practitioner would not give an opinion.

"I find," he said, "nothing abnormal, and nothing peculiar. Besides, the case occurs fairly frequently. There are bodies just as there are characters. When we see so many marriages upset by incompatibility of temper, it is not surprising to see others sterile through physical incompatibility. Madame seems to me particularly well constituted and well made to have children. Monsieur, for his part, although presenting no symptom of abnormal

conformation, seems to me debilitated, perhaps even as a consequence of his excessive desire to be a father. Will you allow me to sound your heart and lungs?"

Lesable, uneasy, took off his waistcoat, and for a long time the doctor glued his ear to the clerk's thorax and back, then repeatedly tapped him from the stomach to the neck and from the small of his back to the nape.

He found a slight disturbance in the first beats of the heart, and even a slight threat to the chest.

"You must look after yourself, Monsieur, you must look after yourself carefully. It's anaemia, exhaustion, nothing else. These irregularities, of little significance now, might very soon become incurable."

Lesable, pale with anguish, asked for a prescription. He was prescribed a complicated regimen, iron, red meat, broth during the day, exercise, rest and a stay in the country during the summer. Then the doctor gave them advice for the time when he was better. He acquainted them with methods used in cases like theirs and which had often succeeded.

The consultation cost forty francs.

When they were out in the street, Cora declared, full of sullen anger, and anticipating the future: "A pretty mess I've been landed in!"

He did not reply. He walked along, overcome with fear, investigating and weighing the doctor's every word. Had he not deceived him? Had he not considered him done for? He scarcely thought of the inheritance now, nor of the child! His life was at stake!

He seemed to hear a whistling in his lungs and feel his heart beat violently. While they were walk-

ing through the Tuilleries he suddenly felt faint and wanted to sit down. Exasperated, his wife remained standing near him, to humiliate him, looking him up and down with scornful pity. He breathed with difficulty, exaggerating the breathlessness which sprang from his emotion; and with the fingers of his left hand on the pulse of his right wrist, he was counting the beats of the artery.

Cora, who was stamping with impatience, asked : "Have you made enough fuss now? Are you quite ready?" He got up, as victims get up, and started walking again without saying a word.

When Cachelin learnt the result of the consultation, he did not restrain his fury. He yelled : "We're in a fine mess now right enough, a fine mess." And he looked at his son-in-law with wild eyes as if he wanted to devour him.

Lesable did not listen, did not hear, thinking now only of his health, of his threatened existence. They could scream as much as they liked, father and daughter, they weren't in his skin, and his skin he wanted to preserve.

He had bottles of medicine on his table, and at every meal he would dose himself, under the smiles of his wife and the raucous laughs of his father-in-law. He would look at himself in the mirror at every instant, he would put his hand on his heart at every moment to observe the beats, and he had a bed made up for himself in a dark room which had served as a cloak-room before, no longer wishing to be in carnal contact with Cora.

He now felt towards her a scared hatred, mingled with contempt and disgust. All women, moreover, now seemed monsters to him, dangerous beasts,

whose mission was to kill men ; and he only thought of Aunt Charlotte's will now as one thinks of an accident in the past from which one nearly died.

More months rolled by. There was only one year left before the final limit.

Cachelin had hung up in the dining-room an enormous calendar from which, every morning, he effaced a day, and the exasperation of his powerlessness, the despair of feeling this fortune slipping from him week by week, the fury to think that he would still have to drudge at the office, and afterwards live on a pension of two thousand francs to the end of his days, drove him to words of violence, which would have become blows for less than nothing. He could not look at Lesable without trembling with a furious need to beat him, crush him, stamp on him. He hated him with an inordinate hatred. Every time he saw him open the door and come in, it seemed to him that a thief was breaking into his house, a thief who had despoiled him of a sacred property, of a family inheritance. He hated him more than one hates a mortal enemy, and at the same time he despised him for his weakness, and above all for his cowardice, since he had given up pursuing the common hope for fear of his health.

Indeed Lesable lived more apart from his wife than if no bond had united them. He no longer came near her, no longer touched her, even avoided her look, as much through shame as through fear.

Every day Cachelin would ask his daughter : "Well, has your husband made up his mind to?"

She would reply : "No, papa."

At table there were painful scenes every evening. Cachelin repeated endlessly : "When a man is

not a man, it would be better for him to kick the bucket and make way for another."

And Cora would add : "The fact is that there are some people who are quite useless and very much in the way. I'm not quite sure what they do on this earth if it's not being a burden to everybody."

Lesable drank his patent medicines and did not reply. One day, at last, his father-in-law shouted to him : "You know, if you don't change your step, now that you are better, I know very well what my daughter will do ! . . .

The son-in-law raised his eyes, anticipating another insult, interrogating with his look. Cachelin continued : "She'll get somebody else, by Jove ! And you're damn lucky if it hasn't already been done ! When one's married a wretch like you, anything is allowed."

Lesable, livid, replied : "I'm certainly not preventing her from following your good advice."

Cora had lowered her eyes. And Cachelin, vaguely feeling that he had just over-shot the mark, remained a little confused.

VI

At the Ministry, the two men seemed to be on fairly good terms. A sort of tacit understanding had been made between them to hide the quarrels of their home-life from their colleagues. They called each other "my dear Cachelin"—"my dear Lesable," and even pretended to laugh together, to be happy and pleased, satisfied with their life in common.

Lesable and Maze, for their part, behaved towards each other with the ceremonial politeness of adver-

saries who nearly fought each other. The would-be duel, which had cast its shadow on them, caused between them an exaggerated politeness, a more marked consideration, and perhaps a secret desire to be brought together, sprung from the vague fear of a fresh complication. People noticed and approved of their attitude of men-of-the-world who have had an affair of honour.

They greeted each other from a long way off, with austere gravity, and a large, and altogether dignified, sweep of the hat.

They did not speak to each other, neither of the two wishing, or daring, to take it upon himself to begin.

But one day, Lesable, whom the Chief was asking for immediately, began to run to show his zeal, and, at the turning of the corridor, he went full tilt into the belly of a clerk who was coming from the opposite direction. It was Maze. Both stepped back, and Lesable asked with confused and polite eagerness : "I hope I haven't hurt you, Monsieur?"

The other replied : "Not at all, Monsieur."

From that moment, they considered it proper to exchange a few words when they met. Then, vying with each other in courtesy, they were obliging to each other, and there soon arose a certain familiarity, an intimacy tempered by reserve, the intimacy of people who had misjudged each other, but in whom a certain timid hesitation still restrains the warmth; then, by dint of polite attentions and visits from room to room, a friendship sprang up.

They often chatted now when they came for news into the registering-clerk's office. Lesable had lost his haughty look of the clerk bound to succeed, and

Maze set aside his pose of man-of-the-world; and Cachelin joined in their conversation and seemed to watch their friendship with interest. Sometimes, after the departure of the handsome clerk, who walked away with upright figure, grazing the top of the door with his head, he would murmur, looking the while at his son-in-law: "He's a fine specimen anyway!"

One morning, when all four of them were there, for Papa Savon never left his work, the copying-clerk's chair, doubtless sawn through by some practical joker, collapsed under him, and the old fellow tumbled to the floor uttering a cry of terror.

The three others rushed forward. The registering-clerk attributed this machination to the *Communards* and Maze wanted, at all hazards, to see the injured spot. Cachelin and he even tried to undress the old man, to tend him, so they said. But he resisted desperately, crying that there was nothing wrong with him.

When the merriment had died down, Cachelin suddenly exclaimed: "I say, Monsieur Maze, you know, now that we get on well together, you ought to come and dine at home with us on Sunday. It would please us all, my son-in-law, myself and my daughter, who knows you well by name, for we often talk about the office. You will then, won't you?"

Lesable joined his entreaties, but less warmly, to those of his father-in-law: "Do come, you would give us much pleasure."

Maze hesitated, embarrassed, smiling at the thought of all the rumours that were running around.

Cachelin pressed him: "Come! it's understood?"

"—Right. Yes. I'd love to come."

When they returned and her father told her : "You know, M. Maze is coming to dinner here next Sunday," Cora, surprised at first, stammered : "Monsieur Maze?—well!"

And she blushed to the roots of her hair, without knowing why. She had so often heard about him, his manners, and his successes, for in the Ministry he had the reputation of being bold with women and irresistible, that a desire to know him had awoken in her long ago.

Cachelin continued, rubbing his hands : "You'll see, he's a fine fellow, and a handsome lad. He's as tall as a trooper, he's not like your husband, this chap!"

She said nothing in reply, confused, as if they could have guessed what she had dreamt about him.

They prepared this dinner with as much care as the previous one for Lesable. Cachelin discussed the dishes, wanted everything to be right, and just as if an unavowed and still uncertain trust had arisen in his heart, he seemed gayer, soothed by some secret and sure foreknowledge.

All through Sunday, he supervised the preparations with excitement, whilst Lesable dealt with an urgent case which he had brought back from office the evening before. It was the first week of November, and New Year's Day was approaching.

At seven o'clock, Maze arrived, full of good humour. He came in as if it were his own home, and, with a compliment, offered a big bunch of roses to Cora. He added in that familiar tone of people who are used to society : "It seems to me, Madame, that I know you a little, that I have known you since

you were a little girl, for it's many years now since your father has been speaking to me about you."

On seeing the flowers, Cachelin exclaimed : "That's real manners, that is." And his daughter recalled to mind that Lesable had not brought any the day he was introduced. The good-looking assistant laughed good-naturedly and openly, like a man who has come to see old friends for the first time, and darted discreet gallantries at Cora, which made her cheeks scarlet.

He thought her highly desirable. She considered him very fascinating. When he had gone, Cachelin exclaimed : "Eh ! what a fine fellow, and what a scamp he must be ! It appears that he can get round any woman."

Cora, less expansive, admitted, however, that she found him "pleasant and not such a *poseur* as she had thought."

Lesable, who seemed less weary and less gloomy than usual, agreed that he had "misunderstood" him early on.

Maze came again, with reserve at first, then more often. Everybody liked him. They encouraged him, made a fuss of him. Cora made him dishes he liked. And the three men's intimacy was soon so great that they scarcely left each other. The new friend took the family to the theatre, in boxes obtained by means of press-tickets.

They would return on foot, at night, along the streets full of people, as far as the door of the Lesable household. Maze and Cora would walk in front, in even step, hip to hip, swaying in the same movement, the same rhythm, like two beings created to go through life, side by side. They talked in a low

voice, for they understood each other perfectly, laughing a little suppressed laugh; and sometimes the young woman would turn round to cast a glance behind at her father and her husband.

Cachelin enveloped them with a benevolent look, and often, without realising that he was talking to his son-in-law, he would declare: "They certainly look well, it's a pleasure to see them together." Lesable replied calmly: "They are almost the same height," and, happy to feel that his heart was beating less violently, that he was less out of breath when he walked quickly, he gradually allowed his rancour towards his father-in-law to disappear, the latter's malicious jokes, moreover, having ceased for some time.

On New Year's Day he was appointed senior clerk. It gave him such profound joy, that he kissed his wife on his return, for the first time in six months. She seemed quite taken aback at it, embarrassed as if he had done something improper; and she looked at Maze, who had come to present her his respects and good wishes on the occasion of the New Year. He himself looked uncomfortable, and he turned towards the window, like a man who does not want to see.

But Cachelin soon became irritable and bad-tempered again, and he began to torment his son-in-law with witticisms. Sometimes he even attacked Maze, as if he bore him a grudge also for the catastrophe suspended over them, the inevitable date of which was approaching every minute.

Cora alone seemed absolutely calm, absolutely happy, absolutely radiant. It seemed that she had

forgotten the threatening time-limit which was so near.

It was already March. All hope seemed lost, for it would be three years, on the 20th of July, since Aunt Charlotte had died.

An early Spring was making the earth shoot forth; and Maze suggested to his friends that they should go for an outing by the side of the Seine, one Sunday, to pick violets in the woods. They left by a morning train and got out at Maisons-Laffite. A wintry chill blew through the naked branches, but the shining grass, green again, was already spotted with white and blue flowers; and the fruit-trees on the hills seemed to be garlanded with roses, their thin arms covered in blossoming buds.

The Seine, gloomy and muddy from the recent rains, flowed along heavily, between its banks eaten away by the winter floods; and all the dripping fields, as if they had just come out of a bath, exhaled a savour of sweet humidity in the warmth of the first days of sunshine.

They wandered about the park. Cachelin, depressed, prodded the clods of earth with his stick, more weighed down than usual, thinking more bitterly of their misfortune, which would soon be complete. Lesable, morose too, was frightened of wetting his feet in the grass, whilst his wife and Maze were trying to make up a bunch of flowers. For some days Cora had seemed to be unwell, weary and paler.

She suddenly became tired and wanted to go back for lunch. They reached a little restaurant close by an old, ramshackle mill, and the traditional lunch of Parisians on an outing was soon served in the arbour, on the wooden table covered with two napkins, and

right on the edge of the river.

They had crunched fried gudgeon, devoured the beef surrounded with potatoes, and they were just passing round the salad-bowl full of green leaves, when Cora got up suddenly, and began to run towards the bank, holding her napkin to her mouth with both hands.

Lesable, asked anxiously : "What's the matter with her?" Maze, uneasy, blushed and stammered : "I don't know at all She was quite all right just now!" and Cachelin sat there with a startled look, his fork in the air with a leaf of salad on the end.

He got up, looking for his daughter. Leaning over, he saw her with her head against a tree, being sick. A rapid suspicion cut his legs from beneath him, and he collapsed on to his chair, casting terrified looks at the two men, who seemed to be equally confused. He searched them with his anxious eye, no longer daring to speak, mad with anguish and hope.

A quarter of an hour elapsed in profound silence. And Cora reappeared, a little pale, walking with difficulty. No one questioned her in any precise fashion; each seemed to divine a happy event, uncomfortable to talk about, and each burned to know about it, and yet feared to hear it. Cachelin alone asked her : "Are you feeling better?" She replied : "Yes, thank you, it was nothing. But we will go back early, I have got a bit of a headache."

And for the return journey she took her husband's arm, as if to signify something mysterious which she did not yet dare confess.

They separated in the Gare Saint-Lazare. Maze, making a pretext of an engagement which he had

just remembered, went off after bowing and shaking hands.

As soon as Cachelin was alone with his daughter and his son-in law he asked : "What was the matter with you at lunch-time?"

But Cora did not reply at first ; then, after hesitating for some time, she said : "It was nothing. A little sickness."

She walked with a languid step, a smile on her lips. Lesable, ill at ease, his mind troubled, haunted with confused and contradictory ideas, full of desires for luxury, sullen anger, unavowable shame, jealous cowardice, behaved like those sleepers who close their eyes in the morning so that they should not see the ray of light gliding between the shutters and cutting their bed with a brilliant line.

As soon as he had got home, he spoke of some work he had to finish, and shut himself up in his room.

Then Cachelin, placing his two hands on his daughter's shoulders, said : "You are pregnant, aren't you?"

She stammered : "Yes, I think so. Two months gone." She had not finished speaking when he began to jump with joy ; then he began to dance around her a public-house carican, an old relic of his army days. He lifted his leg, leapt in the air despite his belly, and shook the whole flat. The furniture tottered, the glasses rattled in the sideboard, the hanging light swung and vibrated like a ship's lamp.

Then he took his cherished daughter in his arms and embraced her frenziedly ; then, giving her a familiar little tap on her belly, said : "Ah ! It's there at last ! Have you told your husband?"

She murmured, suddenly intimidated: "No. . . Not yet. . . I . . . I was waiting."

But Cachelin exclaimed: "That's all right. You feel embarrassed. Wait, I will go and tell him myself!"

And he rushed into his son-in-law's apartment. On seeing him enter, Lesable, who was doing nothing, got up. But the other gave him no time to find himself: "You know that your wife is pregnant?"

The husband, taken aback, lost countenance, and his cheeks became red. "What? Cora? What do you say?"

"I say she is pregnant. Do you hear? Here's luck!"

And in his joy, he took the other's hands, pressed them and shook them, as if to congratulate and thank him: he repeated: "Ah! It's there at last. That's fine, just fine! Just think, the property is ours. And, containing himself no more, he embraced him in his arms.

He cried: "More than a million, just think, more than a million!" He began to dance about again, then said suddenly: "But come along, she is waiting for you, come and kiss her anyway!" And seizing him round the body, he pushed him in front of him, and hurled him like a cannon-ball into the room where Cora had remained standing, uneasy, listening.

As soon as she saw her husband, she stepped back, choked with sudden emotion. He stood before her, pale and tortured. He looked like a judge and she like a criminal.

At last he said: "It appears that you are pregnant?"

She stammered in a trembling voice: "It seems so."

But Cachelin seized them both by the neck and glued them to each other, nose to nose, crying: "Kiss then, in the name of Heaven! It's worth the trouble."

And, when he had let them go, he declared, bubbling over with mad joy: "At last the game is won! I tell you what, Léopold, we are straight away going to buy an estate in the country. There, at least, you will be able to get back your health."

At this idea Lesable started. His father-in-law continued: "We will invite M. Torchebeuf there with his wife, and as the Chief Assistant is at the end of his tether, you will be able to take his place. That's a first step."

Lesable could see everything whilst Cachelin was talking; he saw himself receiving the Chief, standing in front of a pretty little white house, by the side of the river. He had on a drill coat, and a panama hat on his head.

Something sweet came into his heart at this hope, something warm and good, which seemed to mingle in him, to make him light and in better health already.

He smiled, without replying yet.

Cachelin, drunk with hope, carried away by his dreams, continued: "Who knows? We might become influential in the district. Perhaps you will be a Deputy. In any case, we will be able to see the society round about, and treat ourselves to a little flattery. You will have a little horse and a trap to go to the station every day."

Visions of luxury, elegance and comfort awoke in

Lesable's mind. The thought that he himself would drive a smart little carriage, like those rich people whose lot he had so often envied, decided his satisfaction. He could not prevent himself from saying : "Ah, yes, that would be very nice, by Jove!"

Cora, seeing him won over, smiled too, tender and grateful ; and Cachelin, who could see no more obstacles, declared : "We are going to have dinner at a restaurant. Hang it ! We must treat ourselves to a little celebration."

They were a little drunk when they returned, all three of them, and Lesable, who was seeing double and whose every idea was dancing, could not go back to his dark little room. He lay down, perhaps by mistake, perhaps through forgetfulness, in the still empty bed which his wife would occupy. And all night long it seemed to him that his bed was swaying like a ship, pitching, rolling and capsizing. He was even a little sea-sick.

He was very surprised, on waking up, to find Cora in his arms.

She opened her eyes, smiled, and kissed him with a sudden warmth, full of gratitude and affection. Then she said to him, in the gentle voice which women use when they coax : "If you want to be very nice, you won't go to the Ministry to-day. There is no more need for you to be so particular, since we are going to be very rich. And we will go out into the country again, both of us, quite alone."

He felt rested, full of that tired well-being which follows the over-fatigue of a celebration, and drowsy in the warmth of the bed. He felt an overwhelming desire to remain there a long time, to do nothing else but to live peacefully in luxury. A strange and

powerful need for idleness paralysed his soul, invaded his body. And a vague, persistent, happy thought pervaded him : "He was going to be rich, independent."

But suddenly he was seized by a fear, and he asked in a low voice, as if he were afraid that his words would be overheard by the walls : "You are quite sure that you are pregnant, aren't you?"

She reassured him immediately : "Oh ! Yes, of course. I am not mistaken."

And he, still a little uneasy, began to feel her gently. He ran his hands over her swollen belly. He declared : "Yes it's true—but you will not give birth before the date. Perhaps our right will be contested."

At this supposition she was seized with anger.— Ah, no, never, they were not going to cheat her now, after so much misery, so much trouble and effort, ah, no !—She had sat up, shaking with indignation.

"Let's go to the solicitor's straightway," she said.

But his idea was to get a Doctor's certificate first. So they returned to Dr. Lefilleul's.

He recognised them immediately and asked : "Well, have you been successful?"

They both blushed to the ears and Cora, losing countenance a little, stammered : "I think so, Monsieur."

The Doctor rubbed his hands : "I was expecting it, I was expecting it. The method I told you about never fails, unless there is radical incapability on the part of either husband or wife."

When he had examined the young woman he de-

clared: "Yes, you have done it, bravo, bravo!"

And he wrote on a sheet of paper: "I, the undersigned, Medical Practitioner of the Faculty of Paris, certify that Madame Léopold Lesable, *née* Cachelin, has all the symptoms of pregnancy dating from about three months."

Then, turning towards Lesable: "And you? That chest and that heart?" He sounded him and found him completely cured.

They left with a light step, happy and joyful, arm-in-arm. But, on the way, Léopold had an idea: "Before going to the solicitor's it might be a good idea to put one or two napkins in your waist, it will attract the eye, and it will be better. He won't think that we want to gain time."

So they returned, and he himself undressed his wife to adjust a false belly on her. Ten times in succession he changed the position of the napkins, and he stood a few paces away in order to judge the effect, trying to achieve an absolute resemblance.

When he was satisfied with the result, they started off again, and outside in the street he seemed proud of parading this swollen belly which bore proof of his virility. The solicitor received them kindly. Then he listened to their explanation, ran his eye over the certificate and, as Lesable insisted, saying: "You must also see for yourself for a second Monsieur," he cast a convinced look at the bulky, jutting figure of the young woman.

They waited anxiously; the lawyer declared: "Quite so. Whether the child is born or is going to be born, it exists and it has life. We will therefore defer the execution of the will until Madame gives birth."

When they had left his chambers, they kissed each other on the stairs, their joy was so profound.

VII

After this happy discovery, the three relatives lived together in perfect harmony. They were cheerful, even-tempered and agreeable. Cachelin had recovered all his old joviality, and Cora overwhelmed her husband with attentions. Lesable, too, seemed a different man, always happy and good-natured as he had never been before.

Maze came less often and now seemed ill at ease with the family; they always welcomed him, but with more coldness, for happiness is selfish and dispenses with outsiders.

Cachelin himself seemed to feel a certain secret hostility towards the handsome clerk, whom he had introduced into his household with eagerness a few months before. It was he who told this friend about Cora's pregnancy. He said bluntly, "You know, my daughter is pregnant!"

Maze, feigning surprise, answered: "You don't say so! You must be very pleased."

Cachelin replied: "Why to be sure!" and noticed that his colleague, on the other hand, did not seem delighted. Men seldom like to see in this state the women of whom they are the faithful admirers, be it through their fault or no.

Every Sunday, however, Maze continued to dine at the house. But it was becoming uncomfortable to spend the evenings together, although no grave discord had arisen; and this strange embarrassment increased from week to week. One evening, indeed,

when he had just left, Cachelin declared in an angry voice : "There's man who's beginning to get on my nerves !"

And Lesable replied : "The fact is that he doesn't improve on acquaintance." Cora had lowered her eyes. She did not give her opinion. She always seemed embarrassed in front of the tall Maze, who, for his part, seemed almost ashamed when near her, no longer looked at her smilingly as before, offered no more evenings at the theatre, and seemed to bear this intimacy, formerly so cordial, like a necessary burden.

But one Thursday, at dinner-time, when her husband came back from office, Cora kissed his side-whiskers in a more caressing manner than usual, and murmured in his ear :

"—You won't scold me, will you?"

"—Why should I?"

"—Well,—you see, M. Maze came to see me a little while ago. And as I don't want to be the cause of any gossip, I asked him never to call when you weren't there. He seemed a little offended!"

Lesable surprised, asked :

"—Well, what did he say?"

"—Oh, he didn't say much, but I didn't like it all the same, and I asked him then to stop his visits altogether. You know very well it was you and father who brought him here, I had nothing to do with it. So I was frightened of displeasing you by shutting the door on him."

A feeling of joy and gratitude came into her husband's heart : "You have done very well, very well. And I even thank you for it."

In order to define clearly the respective positions

of the two men, which she had arranged in advance, she continued :

“At the office, you will pretend to know nothing, and you will talk to him as before : only he won’t come here any more.”

And Lesable, taking his wife tenderly in his arms, kissed her for a long time on the eyes and cheeks. He repeated : “You are an angel !” And he felt against his belly the swelling of the child, already strong within her.

VIII

Nothing new happened up to the end of the period of pregnancy.

Cora gave birth to a daughter late in September. She was called Désirée ; but, as they wanted to have a proper baptism, it was decided that it should not take place until the following summer, in the country-house they were going to buy.

They chose one at Asnières, on the hill which overlooks the Seine.

Great events had taken place during the winter. No sooner had the inheritance been acquired, than Cachelin had put in a claim for his retirement, which was settled straight off, and he had left the office. He spent his leisure-hours carving cigar-box lids, by means of a fine, mechanical saw. He made clocks, caskets, flowerstands, all sorts of strange little articles of furniture. He was fascinated by this work, the taste for which had come to him when he saw a pedlar carving pieces of wood thus in the Avenue de l’Opéra. And, every day, everybody

had to admire his new designs, of skilful and puerile intricacy.

Himself marvelling at his own work he would repeat endlessly: "It's amazing what one can do."

The Chief Assistant, M. Rabot, having at last died, Lesable was discharging his duties, although he did not receive the title, for there had been an insufficient interval since his last promotion.

Cora had straightway become a different woman, more reserved, more elegant, having understood, divined, and sensed the transformation imposed by wealth.

On the occasion of New Year's Day she made a visit to the Chief's wife, a stout lady who was still provincial after living thirty-five years in Paris, and she used so much grace and charm in begging her to be the godmother of her child, that Mme. Torchebeuf consented. The grandfather, Cachelin, was godfather.

The ceremony took place on a glorious June Sunday. The whole office was invited, except the handsome Maze, who was not seen.

At nine o'clock Lesable was at the station waiting for the train from Paris, whilst a groom in livery, with large gilt buttons, held by the bridle a plump little pony harnessed to a brand new trap.

The engine whistled in the distance, and then appeared, drawing its chain of carriages, from which there emerged a stream of passengers.

M. Torchebeuf got out of a first-class compartment, together with his magnificently attired wife, whilst Pitolet and Boissel got down from a second class carriage. They had not dared to invite Papa Savon, but it was agreed that they would meet him

by chance, in the afternoon, and bring him along to dinner with the Chief's assent.

Lesable rushed up to his superior, who was approaching, quite tiny in his frock-coat adorned with his great decoration like a blown red rose. His enormous head, surmounted with a broad-brimmed hat, weighed down on his puny body, and made him look like a phenomenon; and his wife, by raising herself the merest trifle on her toes, could easily look over his head.

Léopold, radiant, bowed and thanked them. He helped them into his trap, then, running towards his two colleagues who were coming along modestly in the rear, he shook hands with them, excusing himself for being unable to take them also in his carriage, which was too small: "Follow the embankment and you will come to my gate. 'Villa Désirée', the fourth after the turning. Hurry up."

And, climbing into his carriage, he seized the reins and started off, whilst the groom leapt nimbly on to the little seat behind.

The ceremony took place in the best possible conditions. Then they returned for lunch. Each found, under his napkin, a gift proportionate to the importance of the guest. The godmother had a massive gold bracelet, her husband a ruby tie-pin, Boissel a wallet of Russian leather, and Pitolet a superb Meerschaum pipe. It was Désirée, they said, who was offering these presents to her new friends. Mme. Torchebeuf, red with embarrassment and pleasure, put the shining band on her fat arm, and, as the Chief had a thin, black tie on which a pin could not be worn, he fixed the jewel on the lapel of his frock-coat, beneath the Legion of Honour

like another decoration of a lower order.

Through the window, they could see a great ribbon of water, wending its way to Suresnes, along banks planted with trees. The sunshine streamed down on to the water, transforming it into a river of fire. The beginning of the meal was solemn, made serious by the presence of M. and Mme. Torchebeuf. Then it livened up. Cachelin let out some risky jokes, which he felt were permissible because he was rich; and everybody laughed.

If they had come from Pitolet or from Boissel, they would certainly have shocked.

At dessert, the child had to be brought in to be kissed by each guest. Drowned in snowy lace, it looked at these people with its dim, blue, unthinking eyes, and it turned its puffy face a little, in which there seemed to be awaking the first glimmerings of attention.

Pitolet, in the midst of the noise of the voices, whispered into the ear of his neighbour Boissel: "She looks like a little Maze-ette."

The phrase went round the Ministry, next day.

Meanwhile, two o'clock had struck; liqueurs had been taken, and Cachelin proposed that they should look round the property, and then go for a walk along by the Seine.

In procession the guests circulated from room to room, from the cellar to the loft, then they went over the garden, from tree to tree and plant to plant, then they split up into two groups for the walk.

Cachelin, a little uncomfortable with the ladies, dragged Boissel and Pitolet off to the cafés on the river-bank, whilst Mmes. Torchebeuf and Lesable, with their husbands, went on to the other bank, res-

pectable women being unable to mingle with the untidily-dressed Sunday crowds.

They walked slowly along the tow-path, followed by the two men, who were talking gravely about the office.

On the river rowing-boats were passing, driven with long oar-sweeps by young lads with bare arms, the muscles rippling under the sun-burnt skin. Boating-women, stretched out on black or white animal skins, were at the helm, drowsy in the sunshine, holding umbrellas of red, yellow or blue silk open over their heads, like enormous flowers floating on the water. Cries flew from one boat to the other, shouts and vulgar remarks; and a far-away noise of human voices, confused and incessant, betrayed the presence of the swarming holiday crowd in the distance.

Rows of anglers sat motionless along the length of the river; whilst almost naked bathers, standing in cumbersome fishing-boats, took headers into the water, climbed on to their boats again, and once more leapt into the current.

Mme. Torchebeuf was watching, surprised, Cora said to her: "It's like this every Sunday. It spoils this charming country-spot for me."

A rowing-boat came along slowly. Two women, at the oars, were rowing two young fellows who were lying in the stern. One of the women shouted to the bank: "Hi there! you respectable women! I've a man for sale—quite cheap—would you like him?"

Cora, turning round disdainfully, passed her arm through her guest's: "We can't even stay here, let's go. How shameless these creatures are!"

And they set off again. M. Torchebeuf said to Lesable : "It's fixed for the First of January. The Director has expressly promised me." And Lesable replied : "I don't know how to thank you, dear master."

On their return, they found Cachelin, Pitolet and Boissel laughing till the tears came and almost carrying Papa Savon, who had been found on the bank with a wench, so they declared as a joke.

The old man repeated frantically : "It isn't true ; no that isn't true. It's not nice to say that Monsieur Cachelin, it's not nice."

And Cachelin, choking, cried : "Ah ! you old rascal ! You were calling her : 'My darling little goose-feather'. Ah ! we caught him, the rogue !"

Even the two ladies themselves began to laugh, the old fellow seemed so dismayed.

Cachelin continued : "If Monsieur Torchebeuf will permit, we are going to keep him prisoner as a punishment, and he will have dinner with us, yes?"

The Chief kindly consented. And they went on laughing about the lady abandoned by the old man, who kept on protesting, desolated at this wicked joke.

Right until the evening it was an inexhaustible subject for witticisms and even lent itself to coarse ribaldry.

Cora and Mme. Torchebeuf, sitting under the awning over the front steps, gazed at the reflections of the sunset. The sun cast a purple dust between the leaves. Not a breath of air stirred the branches ; serene and infinite peace fell from the calm, flaming sky.

A few boats were still passing, slower, on their way back to the boat-house.

Cora asked : "It seems that this poor M. Savon married a bad woman?"

Mme. Torchebeuf, well informed about everything in the office, replied : "Yes, an orphan, much too young, who deceived him with a worthless fellow, and ended up by running away with him. I say he was a worthless fellow, but I really know nothing. People say they were much in love with each other. In any case, Papa Savon is hardly very attractive."

Mme. Lesable gravely replied : "That's no excuse. The poor man is much to be pitied. Our next-door neighbour, M. Barbou, is in the same position. His wife was infatuated with a sort of painter who used to spend the summers here, and she has gone abroad with him. I don't understand how a woman can fall so low. In my opinion, there ought to be a special punishment for wretches like that who bring shame on to a family."

The nurse appeared at the end of the drive, bringing Désirée in in her lace. The child came towards the two ladies, all rosy in the red-gold evening haze. She was gazing at the fiery sky with that same pale, astonished, and vague eye which she cast on people's faces.

All the men, who were chatting a little farther off, drew nearer, and Cachelin, taking hold of his grandchild, lifted her up at arm's length as if he wanted to thrust her into the firmament. She was outlined against the brilliant back-ground of the horizon with her long, white clothes which fell right to the ground.

And the grandfather cried : "Ah ! this is the best thing in the whole world, isn't it Papa Savon?"

And the old man did not reply, having nothing to say, or, perhaps, thinking of too many things.

A servant opened the door leading to the steps, announcing : "Madame, dinner is served !"

DENIS

To Léon Chapron

I

M. MARAMBOT opened the letter handed to him by Denis, his servant, and smiled.

Denis, who had been with him for twenty years, a short, thick-set, jovial man, spoken of throughout the whole district as the model servant, asked :

“Monsieur is pleased? Monsieur has received good news?”

M. Marambot was not rich. Retired village chemist, a bachelor, he lived on a small income acquired with difficulty by selling medicines to the country-folk. He replied : “Yes, my lad. Old Malois is backing out of the court-case I was threatening him with. I shall get my money tomorrow. Five thousand francs won’t do any harm in an old bachelor’s moneybox.”

And M. Marambot rubbed his hands. He was a man of resigned character, sad rather than gay, incapable of sustained effort, and careless in his business matters.

He could certainly have earned a more considerable fortune through profiting by the deaths of fellow-chemists, who were established in important centres, to go and fill their place and take over their business. But the bother of moving house, and the thought of all the steps he would have to take, had repeatedly kept him back; and after two days’ reflection he

would content himself with saying :

“Never mind ! I’ll leave it till the next time, I lose nothing by waiting. Perhaps I’ll find something better.”

Denis, on the other hand, urged his master to undertake new enterprises. Of an active character, he would repeat endlessly :

“Now if I had had the initial capital, I’d have made a fortune. Just a thousand francs would have seen me through.”

M. Marambot smiled without replying, and went out into his little garden, where he walked about, hands behind his back, day-dreaming.

All day long Denis sang country-tunes and rounds, like a man filled with joy. He even showed unusual activity, for he cleaned all the windows in the house, rubbing the panes with fervour, and singing his ditties at the top of his voice.

M. Marambot, astonished at his zeal, told him several times, smiling :

“If you work like that, my lad, you’ll have nothing left to do tomorrow.”

The next day, about nine o’clock in the morning, the postman handed Denis four letters for his master, one of which was very heavy. M. Marambot immediately shut himself up in his room until the middle of the afternoon. He then gave his servant four letters for the post. One of them was addressed to M. Malois; it was doubtless a receipt for the money.

Denis asked his master no questions; to-day he seemed as sad and gloomy as he had been joyful the day before.

Night came. M. Marambot went to bed at his

usual hour and fell asleep.

He was awoken by a strange noise. He immediately sat up in his bed and listened. But suddenly his door opened, and Denis appeared on the threshold, holding a candle in one hand and a kitchen-knife in the other, his eyes big and staring, his lips and cheeks drawn like those of people who are agitated by some horrible emotion, and so pale that he seemed like a ghost.

M. Marambot, dumbfounded, thought Denis had taken to walking in his sleep, and he was going to get up and run forward to meet him, when the servant blew out the candle and rushed towards the bed. His master stretched his hands out in front of him to receive the shock, which knocked him over on to his back; and he tried to seize his servant's hands, whom he now thought to be stricken with madness. in order to ward off the rain of blows he was dealing him.

He was struck by the knife first in the shoulder, a second time on the forehead, a third time in the chest. He struggled frantically, waving his arms about in the darkness, kicking too, and crying :

“Denis ! Denis ! What are you doing ? Are you mad ? Denis !”

But the other, panting, went on striking him still, now driven back by a kick, now by a blow with the fist, but always coming back furiously. M. Marambot was wounded twice more in the leg and once in the belly. But suddenly a rapid thought crossed his mind, and he began to cry :

“Leave off, Denis ! leave off ! I didn't get my money !”

The man immediately stopped; and his master

could hear his hissing breathing in the darkness.

M. Marambot straightway continued: "I didn't receive anything. M. Malois retracted, the lawsuit is going to take place; that's why you took those letters to the post. Read the ones on my desk if you doubt it."

And, with a last effort, he picked up the matches on his bedside table, and lit his candle.

He was covered in blood. Scalding jets had bespattered the wall. Sheets and curtains, everything was red. Denis, bloodstained too from head to foot, stood in the middle of the room.

When he saw all this, M. Marambot thought he was dead, and he lost consciousness.

He came to at day-break. It took him some time to regain his senses, to realise and remember everything. But the remembrance of the attack, and the wounds he had received, suddenly came back to him and he was seized by such a violent terror that he closed his eyes so that he might see nothing. After a few minutes his fear subsided and he began to reflect. He had not died on the spot, so he might recover. He was weak, very weak, but in no great pain, although in various parts of his body he felt an acute, uncomfortable pricking. He also felt icy-cold, and all wet, tightly wrapped, and as if rolled up, in strips of cloth. He thought that this wetness must come from the running blood; and he was shaken by pangs of anguish at the dreadful thought of this reddened liquid which had come from his veins and with which his bed was covered. The idea of seeing this frightful spectacle again overwhelmed him, and he forcibly kept his eyes closed as if they were going to open despite himself.

What had become of Denis? He had probably made his escape.

But what was *he* going to do now, he, Marambot? Get up? call for help? But, if he made a single movement, without a doubt his wounds would open up again, and he would bleed to death.

Suddenly he heard his bed-room door being pushed open. His heart almost stopped beating. It was Denis coming to finish him off, for sure. He held his breath so that the assassin should think that all was over, and that he had completed his work.

He felt someone taking off the sheet, then passing a hand over his belly. A sharp pain, near the hip, made him start. He was being washed in cold water now, very gently. So the crime had been discovered and they were tending him, they were saving him. He was seized with frantic joy; but, by a prudent move, he did not want to show that he had regained consciousness, and he half opened one eye, one only, with the greatest precaution.

He recognised Denis standing near him, Denis in person! Mercy on him! He hastily closed his eye again. Denis! What was he doing then? What did he want? What dire scheme was he harbouring now?

What was he doing? Why, he was washing him to remove the traces. And he was going to bury him now in the garden, ten feet beneath the soil, so that he should not be found! Or perhaps in the cellar, under the bottles of choice wine?

And M. Marambot began to tremble so violently that all his limbs shook.

He said to himself: "I am lost, lost!" And, in despair, he kept his eyelids tightly closed so that

he should not see the last thrust of the knife descending on him. It did not come. Denis was now lifting him up and bandaging him in a piece of cloth. Then he began to dress the wound on his leg, carefully, as he had learnt to do when his master was a chemist.

No further hesitation was possible for a man whose occupation this had been : his servant, after wanting to kill him, was now trying to save him.

Then M. Marambot, in a faint voice, gave him the following practical advice :

“Do the cleansing and dressing with water mixed with saponine coal-tar !”

Denis replied :

“That’s what I’m doing, Monsieur.”

M. Marambot opened both eyes.

There was no longer a trace of blood on the bed, in the room, or on the assassin. The wounded man was lying on spotlessly white sheets.

The two men looked at each other.

At last M. Marambot said gently :

“You have committed a great crime.”

Denis replied :

“I am trying to make up for it now, Monsieur. If you don’t give me away I shall serve you faithfully as I have done in the past.”

It was not the moment to displease his servant. Closing his eyes again M. Marambot declared :

“I swear I shall not give you away.”

II

Denis saved his master. He went days and nights without sleep, never left the sick man’s room, prepared medicines for him, infusions and draughts,

feeling his pulse, anxiously counting the beats, tending him with the skill of a nurse and the devotion of a son.

At every moment he would ask :

“Well, Monsieur, how do you feel now?”

M. Marambot would reply in a feeble voice :

“A little better, my lad, thank you.”

And when the wounded man woke up, at night, he would often see his guardian weeping in his arm-chair and wiping his eyes in silence.

Never had the old chemist been so well looked after, so pampered, so spoilt. At first he had said to himself :

“As soon as I am well, I shall get rid of this scoundrel.”

He was now entering the convalescent stage, and put off from day to day the time of parting company with his murderer. He thought that no one would have so much consideration and regard for him, and that he was also holding on to this servant through fear; and he warned Denis that he had lodged a deposition with his lawyer, denouncing him to justice if any further accident should occur.

This precaution seemed to him to guarantee him from any fresh attempt in the future; and he then wondered if it would not even be wiser to keep this man near him, to watch him carefully.

As before, when he used to hesitate to take over some more important chemist's business, he could not bring himself to make a decision.

“There's still time,” he would say to himself.

Denis continued showing himself to be an incomparable servant. M. Marambot was cured. He kept him.

Then, one morning, as he was just finishing his lunch, he suddenly heard a great noise in the kitchen. He hastened towards it. Denis was struggling in the arms of two gendarmes. The officer was gravely taking notes in his note-book.

As soon as he saw his master, the servant began to sob, crying : "You have given me away, Monsieur ; that's not right after what you promised me. You've broken your word of honour, Monsieur Marambot ; it isn't right, it isn't right !—"

M. Marambot, stupefied and desolated at being thus suspected, raised his hand.

"I swear before God, my lad, that I did not give you away. I am completely ignorant as to how the gendarmes could have known about the murderous attack on me."

The officer started :

"You say that he tried to kill you, Monsieur Marambot?"

The chemist, bewildered, replied :

"Why, yes . . . But I didn't give him away . . . I didn't say anything—I swear I didn't say anything . . . He has served me very well since that time. . . ."

The officer declared severely :

"I am taking note of your statement. The law will take into account this new charge which was unknown before, M. Marambot. I have orders to arrest your servant for the theft of two ducks, surreptitiously removed by him from the home of M. Duhamel, of which crime there are witnesses. I ask your pardon, Monsieur Marambot. I will take your declaration into account."

And, turning to his men, he ordered :

“Come, let us go !”

The two gendarmes dragged Denis away.

III

The barrister had just pleaded insanity, making the one crime bear upon the other, to strengthen his argument. He had already proved that the theft of the two ducks arose from the same mental state as the eight knife-wounds in Marambot’s person. He had skilfully analysed all the phases of this passing state of mental derangement, which would no doubt yield to a few months’ treatment in a good asylum. He had spoken in enthusiastic terms of the continuous devotion of this worthy servant, of the wonderful care with which he had surrounded his master, wounded by him in a moment of frenzy.

Touched to the heart by the remembrance of this, M. Marambot felt his eyes moist with tears.

The barrister noticed it, opened his arms in a sweeping gesture, unfurling his long, black sleeves like the wings of a bat. And, in a ringing voice, he cried :

—“Look, look, gentlemen of the jury, look at those tears. What can I say now for my client? What speech, what argument, what reasoning could be worth as much as these tears of his master? They speak more strongly than I do, more strongly than the law; they cry : ‘Pardon for the madman of an hour !’ They implore, they absolve, they bless !”

He ended and sat down.

Then the judge, turning to Marambot, whose testimony for his servant had been excellent, asked him :

"But surely, Monsieur, even if you considered this man out of his senses, that does not explain why you kept him with you. He was no less dangerous for that."

Marambot replied, wiping his eyes:

"What could I do, Mr. President? It is so difficult to find servants these days . . . and I couldn't have come across a better one."

Denis was acquitted and put into a lunatic asylum at his master's expense.

THE DONKEY

To Louis le Poitterin

NOT a breath of air came through the thick mist slumbering on the river. It was like a cloud of dingy cotton-wool laid on the water. The banks themselves remained indistinct, half-hidden by fantastic clouds of vapour, which hung in festoons resembling mountains. But, as the day was near dawning, the hill-side began to be visible. At the foot of it, in the growing light of the dawn, there gradually appeared the big, white patches of the plaster-coated houses. Cocks were crowing in the fowl-houses.

Some way off, on the other side of the river, shrouded in the mist, just opposite La Frette, a faint noise would now and then disturb the great silence of the breathless calm. It was now a vague rippling, like the cautious movement of a boat, now a sharp noise, like the impact of an oar on the planking, now like the fall of a soft object into the water. Then, nothing more.

And sometimes low voices, coming from one knows not where, perhaps from very far, perhaps from very near, straying through these opaque mists, rising from the land or from the water, slid by, timid too, and passed like those wild birds which have slept in the reeds, and which leave at the first palleness in the sky, to fly away again, to fly for ever, and which one glimpses for a second winging their way through the mist, and uttering a gentle, timid

cry, which awakens their brothers along the banks.

Suddenly, near the shore, close by the village, a shadow appeared on the water, barely perceptible at first; then it grew bigger and clearer, and, emerging from the misty veil spread over the river, a flat boat, with two men on board, grounded on the grassy bank.

The man who had been rowing stood up and took out a bucket full of fish from the bottom of the boat; then he flung his still streaming net over his shoulders. His companion, who had not moved, said:

“Bring your gun—we’ll pot at a rabbit or two on the banks, shall we, Mailloche?”

The other replied:

“That suits me. Wait for me, I’ll join you.”

And he went off to put their catch in a safe place.

The man who had stayed behind in the little craft slowly filled his pipe and lit it.

He was called Labouise alias Chicot, and was in partnership with his crony Maillochon, commonly called Mailloche, in the exercise of the random and dubious profession of beach-combing.

Boatmen of low degree, they only sailed regularly in times of famine. The rest of the time they were beach-combers. Prowling day and night on the river, on the look out for any prey, dead or alive, river-poachers, nocturnal hunters, kinds of sewer-skimmers, now lying in wait for deer in the forest of Saint-Germain, now in search of the bodies of drowned people, whose pockets they lightened, collectors of floating rags, of empty bottles, borne along in the current, neck in air, swaying like drunkards, and of drifting pieces of wood, Labouise and Maillochon took things easy.

On occasions, they would set off on foot about mid-day and would wander right on. They would have dinner in some inn near the river and would set off again, side by side. They would be away for a day or two; then one morning they would be seen again prowling around in the filthy thing that served them as a boat.

Further down the river, at Joinville or perhaps Nogent, disconsolate boatmen searched for their rowing-boat, missing one night, untied and taken off, stolen without a doubt; whilst fifty or sixty miles from there, on the Oise, a respectable householder was rubbing his hands and admiring the rowing-boat, bought second-hand, the evening before, for fifty francs, from two men who had sold it to him, just like that, while they were passing, having offered it to him spontaneously at sight.

Maillochon reappeared, with his gun wrapped in a rag. He was a man of forty or fifty, tall and thin, with the sharp eye of those who are troubled by legitimate worries, or of much hunted animals. His open shirt displayed his chest, shaggy with grey hair. But he seemed never to have had any other hair but a short, brush-like moustache, and a wisp of stiff hairs under his lower lip. He was bald from the temples.

When he took off the cake of filth which served him as a hat, the skin of his head seemed to be covered in a hazy down of shadowy hair, like the body of a plucked chicken about to be singed.

Chicot, on the other hand, red and blooming, stout, short and hairy, looked like a raw beefsteak hidden in a sapper's hat. He always kept his left eye closed, as if he were aiming at something or some-

body, and when they chaffed him about this ugly habit, shouting to him : "Open your eye, Labouise," he would reply in a calm voice : "Don't you fear, sister, I open it when need be." He also had that habit of calling everybody "sister," even his fellow tramp.

He took the oars in his turn ; and the boat again buried itself in the motionless mist on the river, which was now turning white like milk, under the sky brightened with glimmerings of rose.

Labouise asked :

"What sort of shot have you brought, Maillochon?"

Maillochon replied :

"Small—the new lot, that's what you need for rabbit."

They were nearing the other bank so slowly and so quietly that not a sound betrayed them. This bank belongs to the Saint-Germain forest and is a rabbit-shooting preserve. It is covered with burrows hidden under the roots of trees ; and the animals frisk about at dawn, going and coming, entering and leaving.

Maillochon, on his knees in the bow, was on the look-out, his gun hidden under the boards of the boat. Suddenly he took it up, and the report rumbled away for a long time through the peaceful countryside.

With two strokes of the oar, Labouise hit the shore, and his companion, jumping on land, picked up a little, grey rabbit, all quivering still.

Then the boat again plunged into the fog to regain the other bank and take refuge from the game-keepers.

The two men now seemed to be proceeding peacefully down the river. The weapon had disappeared

under the board which served as a hiding-place, and the rabbit had vanished into Chicot's billowy shirt.

After quarter of an hour, Labouise declared :

"Come on, sister, let's get another."

Maillochon replied :

"That suits me, let's go."

And the boat set off again, going quickly downstream. The mists which covered the river were beginning to rise. One could discern the trees on the banks as if through a veil; and the thinning fog went along with the current, in little clouds.

When they drew near the island, the tip of which is opposite Herblay, the two men slackened speed and began to watch again. Then, before long, a second rabbit was killed.

After this they continued down as far as half-way to Conflans; then they stopped, moored their boat to a tree, and, lying down in the bottom, they went to sleep.

From time to time, Labouise would sit up and scan the horizon with his alert eye. The last mists of the morning had evaporated, and the big, summer sun was rising, resplendent, in the blue sky.

In the distance, on the other side of the river, the hill-side, planted with vineyards, came round in a semi-circle. A single house rose up on the ridge, in a clump of trees. Everything was silent.

But on the tow-path something was slowly moving, scarcely making any headway. It was a woman dragging a donkey along. The animal, ankylosed, stiff and stubborn would pur forward a leg from time to time, yielding to its companion's efforts when it could no longer resist; and it was going along like this, its neck stretched out, its ears back, so slowly

that one could not forecast when it would be out of sight.

The woman was pulling, bent double, and would sometimes turn round to hit the donkey with a stick.

On seeing her, Labouise said :

“Hey you ! Mailloche !”

Mailloche replied :

“What is it ?”

“D’you want to have a lark ?”

“I shouldn’t mind.”

“Come on then, sister, rouse yourself, we’re going to have some fun.”

And Chicot took the oars.

When he had crossed the river and was opposite the couple, he cried :

“Hi there ! sister !”

The woman stopped dragging her donkey and looked. Labouise continued :

“Are you going to the locomotive-fair ?”

The woman made no reply. Chicot went on :

“Hi ! tell me ! your donkey came in first at the races, didn’t he ? Where are you taking him at this speed ?”

The woman at last answered :

“I am going to Macquart’s at Les Champioux, to get it destroyed. It’s no good any more.”

Labouise replied : “I believe you ! And how much will he give you for it, Macquart ?”

The woman, who was wiping her brow with the back of her hand, hesitated :

“How do I know ? Maybe three francs, maybe four ?”

Chicot exclaimed :

“I’ll give you five francs for it, and you won’t have

to go any further. That's a fair deal, isn't it?"

After a moment's reflection, the woman declared :

"All right."

And the beach-combers came on shore.

Labouise seized the bridle of the animal. Surprised, Maillochon asked :

"What on earth do you want with this skin?"

This time Chicot opened his other eye to express his glee. His whole red face grimaced with joy ; he chuckled : "Don't you fear, sister, I know what I'm about."

He gave five francs to the woman, who sat down by the side of the path to see what was going to happen.

Then Labouise, in merry mood, went to fetch his gun, and handing it to Maillochon, said :

"We each have a shot, mate ; we're going to shoot big game, sister. Not so near as that ! Good God ! You'll kill it with the first shot ! We've got to make the amusement last a bit."

And he placed his companion forty paces from the victim. The donkey, feeling that it was free, was trying to crop the long grass on the bank, but it was so decrepit that it wobbled on its legs as if about to fall.

Maillochon took slow aim at it, and said :

"I'll just pepper his ears a little, look, Chicot." And he fired.

The small shot riddled the long ears of the donkey, which began to shake them vigorously, wagging them now one after the other, now together, to get rid of this pricking sensation.

The two men were convulsed with laughter, bent

double, and stamping their feet. But the indignant woman rushed forward, not wanting her donkey to be tormented, offering to give back the five francs. angry and complaining.

Labouise threatened her with a drubbing, and made a show of rolling up his sleeves. He had paid hadn't he? Right then—she could be hanged! He was going to shoot one into her skirts, to show her one didn't feel anything.

And she went off, threatening them with the gendarmes. For a long time they heard her shouting insults, the more vehement as she drew farther away.

Maillochon handed the gun to his comrade :

“Your turn, Chicot.”

Labouise aimed and fired. The donkey received the shot in the thighs, but the pellets were so small, and had been fired from so far, that it doubtless thought it had been stung by horse-flies. For it began to swish its tail energetically, whisking its legs and back.

Labouise sat down to laugh at his ease, whilst Maillochon re-loaded the weapon, so bubbling over with mirth that he seemed to be sneezing into the barrel.

He drew a few paces nearer, and, aiming at the same spot as his comrade had done, he fired again. This time the animal jumped, tried to kick, and turned its head round. A little blood was flowing at last. The shot had gone well in, and a sharp pain made itself felt, for the beast began to run away along the bank with a slow, halting, and jerky gallop.

The two men rushed in pursuit, Maillochon with long strides, Labouise with hurried steps, running the short man's, breathless, little trot.

But the donkey stopped, exhausted, and with wild eyes watched its murderers draw near. Then, suddenly, it stretched out its neck and began to bray.

Panting, Labouise had taken the gun. This time he went very close, having no desire to begin the chase again.

When the donkey had finished uttering its sorrowful plaint, like a cry for help, a last scream of helplessness, the man, who had lighted upon an idea, exclaimed : “ Mailloche,—hi there ! sister ! come here ! I’m going to make him take his medicine.” And whilst the other forced open the animal’s tightly shut mouth, Chicot inserted the barrel of his gun into the depths of its throat, as if he wanted to make it drink a medicine : then he said :

“ Look now, sister ! I’m pouring the purge down !”

And he pressed the trigger. The donkey recoiled three paces, fell back on to its hindquarters, tried to raise itself, and at last collapsed on its side, closing its eyes. All its old, threadbare body was quivering ; its legs waved about as if it wanted to run.

A stream of blood was flowing between its teeth. Soon it moved no more. It was dead.

The two men were not laughing, it was over too quickly, they had been robbed.

Maillochon asked :

“ Well, what’ll we do with it now ?”

Labouise replied :

“ Don’t you fear, sister, let’s put it on board, and we’ll have some fun with it at night-time.”

And they went to fetch the boat. The body of the animal was laid in the bottom, covered in fresh grass, and the two tramps lay down on it and went to sleep again.

About mid day, from the secret coffers of their worm-eaten and muddy boat, Labouise drew out a litre of wine, a loaf of bread, some butter, and some raw onions, and they began to eat.

When their meal was over, they lay down once more on the dead donkey, and slept again. At nightfall, Labouise woke up, and, shaking his comrade, who was snoring like an organ, he gave the order :

“Come on, sister, let’s go !”

And Maillochon began to row. They went up the Seine again, quite slowly, having plenty of time before them. They passed alongside the banks, covered in blooming water-lilies and scented with hawthorns, inclining their white clusters over the stream ; and the heavy craft, mud-coloured, slid over the big, flat leaves of the nenuphars, bending down the pale flowers, round and cloven like little bells, which straightened up afterwards.

When they reached the Eperon wall, which separates the forest of Saint-Germain from the Maisons-Laffitte park, Labouise stopped his companion, and explained his idea, which shook Maillochon with long and silent laughter.

They threw into the water the grass they had strewn on the corpse, took the animal by the feet, lifted it on to land, and went and hid it in a thicket.

Then they boarded their boat again, and reached Maisons-Laffitte.

The night was quite dark when they went into the eating-house of Papa Jules, wine-merchant and eating-house keeper. As soon as he saw them, the tradesman came up, shook hands with them, and sat

down at their table; then they chatted about this and that.

About 11 o'clock, the last customer having left, Papa Jules winked, and said to Labouise:

"Well, have you got anything?"

Labouise made a movement with his head and declared: "Maybe we have, maybe we haven't."

The eating-house keeper persisted:

"Grey ones, just grey ones maybe?"

Then, Chicot, plunging his hand into his woollen shirt, drew out the ears of a rabbit and said:

"That'll be three francs the pair."

Then a long discussion began about the price. They agreed on two francs sixty-five. And the two rabbits were handed over.

As the tramps were getting up, Papa Jules, who had been watching them, declared:

"You've got something else, but you don't want to tell."

Labouise retorted:

"Maybe we have, but not for you, you are too tight-fisted."

Excited, the man pressed him:

"Ah! something big! Come on, say what it is, and we might come to a price."

Labouise, who seemed perplexed, pretended to consult Maillochon with his eye, and then replied in a slow voice: "This is how it was. We were lying in wait down at Eperon, when something passed us in the first thicket on the left, at the end of the wall.

"Maillochon lets off a shot, and gets it. And we bolt 'cos of the keepers; I can't tell you what it is, 'cos I don't know. As far as being big goes, it's certainly big. But what is it? If I were to say

anything I'd be swindling you, and you know, sister, that it's always fair and square between us."

Trembling, the man asked :

"It wouldn't be a roe-buck?"

Labouise replied :

"It might very well be—that or something else. A roe-buck . . . yes. . . . Or perhaps something a little bigger? You might say a hind. Oh! I'm not saying it is a hind, 'cos I don't know, but it might be one!"

The eating-house keeper persisted :

"Maybe it was a stag?"

Labouise extended his hand :

"No, not that. As for its being a stag, it's not a stag, I won't mislead you, it's not a stag. I would have seen the horns. No, as far as stags go, you can count it out."

"Why didn't you bring it along?" asked the man.

"Why, sister? Because from now on, I'm selling on the spot, I am. I have a buver. Right! You see, he strolls around there, he finds something, he takes it along with him. No risks for yours truly. That's how it is."

Suspicious, the eating-house keeper, asked :

"What if it isn't there now?" But Labouise raised his hand again :

"As for its being there, it's there all right. I promise you, I swear to you. In the first thicket on the left. As for what it is, I don't know. I know it's not a stag—no, I'm sure of it. For the rest, it's up to you to go and have a look. Twenty francs down, does that suit you?"

The man still hesitated :

"You couldn't bring it to me?"

Maillochon spoke this time.

"Now, no more playing about. If it's a roe-buck, fifty francs; if it's a hind, seventy; those are our prices."

The eating-house keeper made up his mind :

"Right. Twenty francs. It's a deal." And they tapped the palms of their hands.

Then from his cash-drawer he took four big five-franc pieces, which the two friends pocketed.

Labouise got up, emptied his glass, and went out; just as he was stepping into the shadow, he turned round to make this specification :

"It isn't a stag, for certain. But it might be anything. And as for its being there, it's certainly there. I'll give you your money back if you don't find anything."

And he disappeared into the night.

Maillochon, who was following him, dug him hard in the back with his fists, to convey his glee.

IDYLL

To Maurice Leloir

THE train had just left Genoa on its way to Marseilles, and was following the slow meanderings of the rocky coast, gliding like an iron serpent between the sea and the mountains, crawling on to beaches of yellow sand which the little waves bordered with a strip of silver, and suddenly entering the dark jaws of tunnels like an animal going into its hole.

In the last carriage of the train, a stout woman and a young man were sitting face to face, not talking, and glancing at each other occasionally. She was perhaps twenty-five; and, sitting near the window, she was gazing at the scenery. She was a robust Piedmontese peasant-woman, with black eyes, ample bosom, and plump cheeks. She had thrust several packages under the bench, keeping a basket on her knees.

As for him, he was about twenty, thin and sunburnt, that dark tan of men who work in the fields, in the bright sunshine. Next to him, in a handkerchief, was all his worldly wealth: a pair of shoes, a shirt, a pair of breeches and a jacket. Under the bench he too had hidden something: a shovel and a pickaxe tied together by means of a cord. He was going to look for work in France.

Climbing higher in the sky, the sun poured a rain of fire on to the coast; it was near the end of May, and delightful odours hovered in the air and entered the compartment, the windows of which were lower-

ed. The blossoming orange-and citron-trees, exhaling into the tranquil air their honeyed perfumes, so sweet, so strong and so disturbing, mingled them with the breath of roses growing everywhere like grass, along the railroad, in the gardens of the rich, before the doors of hovels, and in the fields too.

They are in their element on this coast, roses ! They fill the countryside with their powerful and giddy aroma, they turn the air into a delicacy, something more savoury than wine and just as intoxicating.

The train was travelling slowly, as if to linger in this garden, this luxuriousness. At every moment it would stop at little stations, in front of a few white houses, and then start off again at its leisurely pace, after giving a long whistle. No one got in. One might have thought the whole world was drowsy and could not make up its mind to move on this warm, spring forenoon.

From time to time the stout woman closed her eyes, then opened them again hastily when her basket slipped from her knees and was just about to fall. She caught it again with a quick movement, looked outside for a few minutes, then dozed off again. Drops of sweat stood in beads on her brow, and she was breathing with difficulty as if she were suffering from some painful oppression.

The young man had bowed his head and was sleeping the deep sleep of rustics.

Suddenly, as they were leaving a little station, the peasant-woman seemed to wake up, and, opening her basket, she drew out a hunk of bread, some hard-boiled eggs, a bottle of wine, and some plums, lovely, red plums; and she began to eat.

The man, in his turn, had woken up abruptly

and was watching her, watching every mouthful that went from her knees to her mouth. He sat there, with folded arms, his eyes staring, his cheeks hollow, and his lips shut tight.

She ate like the fat, greedy woman she was, at every moment drinking a gulp of wine to wash down the eggs, and stopping to pant a little.

She made everything disappear, bread, eggs, plums and wine. And as soon as she had finished her meal, the lad shut his eyes again. Then, feeling a little uncomfortable, she loosened her bodice, and the man suddenly looked again.

She took no notice, continuing to unbutton her dress, and the heavy pressure of her breasts threw aside the material, showing, between the two, through the widening gap, a little white linen and a little bare skin.

When she felt more comfortable, the peasant-woman said in Italian: "It's so hot, one can't breathe."

The young man replied in the same language and with the same pronunciation: "It's fine weather for travelling."

She asked "You are from Piedmont?"

"I come from Asti."

"I'm from Casale."

They were neighbours. They began to chat.

They said the long-drawn-out, banal things which common people repeat without end, and which satisfy their slow and limited minds. They talked about the district. They had acquaintances in common. They mentioned names, becoming friends as fast as they discovered a new person whom they had both seen. Rapid, eager words

came from their lips with their sonorous endings and their Italian singsong. Then they enquired about each other.

She was married ; she already had three children left in charge of her sister, for she had found a job as a wet-nurse, a good job with a French lady, at Marseilles.

He, for his part, was looking for work. He had been told that he would find a job in that part of the world too, for they were building a lot.

Then they were silent.

The heat was becoming unbearable, streaming down on to the roof of the carriage. A cloud of dust hovered behind the train, and came inside ; and the scents of the orange-trees and roses took on a more intense savour, seeming to thicken and grow heavy.

The two travellers went to sleep once more.

They opened their eyes again almost at the same time. The sun was sinking towards the sea, lighting up its blue surface with a shower of brightness. The air seemed fresher and lighter.

The wet-nurse was panting, her bodice undone, her cheeks flabby, her eyes dim ; and she said in a stifling voice :

“I haven’t given the breast since yesterday ; I am feeling so giddy I could faint.”

He did not reply, not knowing what to say. She went on : “When you’ve got as much milk as I have, you’ve got to give the breast three times a day ; if you don’t, you have a lot of discomfort. It’s like having a weight on my heart ; a weight that stops my breathing and crushes my limbs. It’s miserable to have as much milk as that.”

He declared: "Yes, it's miserable. It must trouble you a lot."

Indeed she seemed very ill, sorely afflicted and faint. She murmured: "You only have to press it and the milk runs out like a fountain. It's really odd to see. You wouldn't believe it. At Casale all the neighbours used to come and look."

He said: "Oh! really?"

"Yes, really. I could easily show you, but it wouldn't do me any good. You can't get enough out that way."

And she was silent.

The train stopped at a halt. Standing near a fence, a woman was holding in her arms a young child who was crying. She was thin and ragged.

The nurse looked at her. She said in a compassionate voice: "There's someone else I could relieve. And the little one could relieve me too. Listen: I'm not rich, since I'm leaving my home, my people and my darling youngest, to go and take up a job; but even then I'd willingly give five francs to have that child for ten minutes and give it the breast. It would soothe him and me too. I feel I would come to life again."

And she stopped talking again. Then she several times passed her burning hand over her brow where the sweat was streaming. And she groaned: "I can't hold out any more. I feel I'm going to die." And, with an unconscious movement, she opened her dress completely.

The right breast appeared, enormous and bursting, with its brown strawberry. And the poor woman moaned: "Oh God! Oh God! what am I going to do?"

The train had started off again and was continuing its way through flowers which exhaled their balmy evenings' penetrating breath. Sometimes a fishing-boat seemed to be asleep on the blue sea, with its white, motionless sail, reflected in the water as if another craft were there, upside down.

Confused, the young man stammered: "Well . . . Madame . . . I could . . . er . . . relieve you."

She replied in a spent voice: "Yes, if you don't mind. You would do me a great favour. I can't stand it any more. I can't stand it."

He knelt down in front of her; she leaned towards him and directed the dark tip of her breast towards his mouth with the typical gesture of a wet-nurse. In the movement she made taking it in her two hands to offer it to this man, a drop of milk appeared at the end. He drank it hastily, seizing this heavy breast between his lips like a fruit. And he began to suck in a greedy and regular fashion.

He had passed both arms round the woman's middle, and held her tight to bring her nearer him; and he drank in slow gulps with a movement of the neck, like that of children.

Suddenly she said: "That's enough for that one, take the other now."

And he obediently took the other.

She had placed both her hands on the young man's back, and she was breathing strongly and happily now, savouring the perfumes of the flowers mingled with the breaths of air which the movement of the train blew into the carriage.

She said: "It smells very nice round here."

He did not reply, still drinking at this fountain of

flesh, and closing his eyes as if to enjoy it the more.

But she pushed him back gently :

“That’s enough. I’m feeling better. It’s brought the life back to my body.”

He had stood up, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

Returning into her dress the two living gourds which swelled her bosom, she said to him :

“You’ve done me a wonderful service. Thank you very much, Monsieur.”

And he replied in a grateful voice :

“I should be thanking you, Madame, it’s two days since I had anything to eat !”

THE PIECE OF STRING

To Harry Alis

ON all the roads round about Goderville, the peasants and their wives were making their way to the town; for it was market-day. The men walked with leisurely steps, the whole body leaning forward at each movement of their long, crooked legs, deformed by the rough work, by the weighing on the plough, which, at the same time, forces up the left shoulder and turns the body to one side, by the mowing of the corn, which makes one spread out the knees to keep a firm balance, by all the slow, laborious tasks of the fields. The blue blouse, starched and shiny, as if varnished, trimmed at the collar and cuffs with a little design in white thread, and puffed out around the bony torso, seemed like a balloon about to fly away, from which there emerged a head, two arms and two feet.

Some drew along a cow or a calf at the end of a rope. And their wives, walking behind the animal, would strike its hindquarters with a branch still bedecked with leaves, to urge it on. They carried wide baskets on their arms, from which emerged the heads of chickens in this one, the heads of ducks in that. And they walked with a quicker and livelier step than their husbands, the figure upright and spare and draped in a scanty little shawl, pinned on to the flat breast, the head enveloped in a white cloth, fitting tightly to their hair, and surmounted with a bonnet.

Then a waggonette would pass, at the jerky trot of a donkey, shaking, not a little, two men sitting side by side and a woman in the back of the vehicle, the edge of which she held, to lessen the hard jolts.

On the market-square of Goderville there was a crowd, a mob, of human beings and animals intermixed. The horns of the bullocks, the tall, long-napped hats of the richer peasants, and the bonnets of the peasant-women emerged to the surface of the crowd. And strident, shrill and screaming voices made a wild, incessant clamour, dominated sometimes by a great roar uttered from the robust chest of a tipsy countryman, or the long-drawn-out bellow of a cow tethered to the wall of a house.

It all smacked of stables, milk and manure, hay and sweat, and gave off that acrid, horrible, human and bestial smell, peculiar to people of the fields.

Maître Hauchecorne, from Bréauté, had just arrived at Goderville, and was making his way towards the market-square, when he saw on the ground a little piece of string. Maître Hauchecorne, with true Norman thrift, thought that anything which might be of use was worth picking up; and he bent down painfully, for he suffered from rheumatism. He took the piece of thin string from off the ground, and was just beginning to roll it up carefully, when he noticed Maître Malandain, the harness-maker, watching him from his door-way. They had once had words over a halter, and, both being spiteful by nature, they had remained on bad terms. Maître Hauchecorne was smitten with a kind of shame at being seen thus, by his enemy, searching in the mud for a bit of string. He hastily hid his find under his blouse, then in his breeches' pocket; then he

pretended to continue looking on the ground for something he could not find, and went off towards the market, head inclined forward, bent in two by his aches.

He was immediately lost in the noisy, sluggish crowd, excited over interminable bargainings. The peasants prodded the cows, walked away, came back, perplexed, always afraid of being taken in, never daring to make up their minds, watching the seller's eye, ceaselessly trying to find out the man's ruse and the animal's defect.

The women, having put their big baskets down at their feet, had taken out their poultry, which were lying on the ground, tied round the legs, with scared eyes and scarlet crests.

They listened to offers and kept to their prices, with a dry look and impassive features, or else, suddenly deciding on the lower price offered, shouted to the customer who was slowly walking away :

“All right, Maître Anthime, I'll give it you.”

Then gradually the square emptied, and, the angelus sounding midday, those who lived too far off dispersed to the inns.

At Jourdain's, the big room was full of diners, just as the vast courtyard was full of vehicles of all varieties, carts, cabs, waggonettes, tilburys, carriages for which there could be no name, yellow with mud, out of shape, patched up, lifting their shafts to the sky like two arms, or else nose down and back up in the air.

Close by the diners sitting at their tables, the vast fire-place, full of bright flame, threw out a fierce heat on to the backs of those in the row on the right. Three spits were turning, laden with chickens,

pigeons and legs of mutton; and a delicious smell of roast meat and gravy streaming over crackling skin escaped from the hearth, kindled tipsiness, and made mouths water.

All the aristocracy of the plough ate there, at the inn of Maître Jourdain, horse-dealer and inn-keeper, a cunning fellow who had a tidy pile.

The dishes came one after the other, and were emptied, as were the jugs of yellow cider. Everybody related his dealings, his purchases and sales. They exchanged news about the crops. The weather was good for the greens, but a little wet for the corn.

Suddenly the drum beat in the courtyard before the house. Everyone was on his feet immediately, except a few indifferent people, and ran to the door or to the windows, mouth still full and napkin in hand.

After he had completed his drum-roll, the town-crier exclaimed in a jerky voice, breaking up his phrases unevenly :

“—Be it known to the inhabitants of Goderville and in general to all—the people present at the market, that this morning, on the Beuzeville Road, between nine and ten o’clock, there was lost a black, leather wallet containing five hundred francs and some business papers. It is requested that it should be returned to the Town Hall, forthwith, or to the house of Maître Fortuné Houlbrèque of Manneville. There will be a reward of twenty francs.”

Then the man went off. Once more they heard in the distance the dull beating of the instrument and the faint voice of the town-crier.

And they began to talk about this event, enumerating the chances Maître Houlbrèque had of finding,

or not finding, his pocket-book again.

And the meal was over.

They were just finishing coffee when the officer of the gendarmerie appeared on the threshold :

He asked :

“Is Maître Hauchecorne of Bréauté here?”

Maître Hauchecorne, sitting at the other end of the table, replied : “Here I am.”

And the officer continued :

“Maître Hauchecorne, would you be so good as to accompany me to the town hall? The Mayor would like to speak to you.”

The peasant, surprised and uneasy, drank down his little glass at a gulp, got up, and, still more bent than in the morning, for the first steps after any rest were particularly difficult, he started on his way, repeating :

“Here I am, here I am.”

And he followed the officer.

The Mayor was waiting for him, sitting in an arm-chair. He was the lawyer of the district, a stout, grave man, who used pompous phrases.

“Maître Hauchecorne,” he said, “this morning, on the Beuzeville Road, you were seen picking up the wallet lost by Maître Houlbrèque, of Manneville.”

Dumbfounded, the peasant looked at the Mayor, already frightened by this suspicion which rested on him, without his understanding why.

“Me? Me? I picked up that wallet?”

“Yes, you.”

“Word of honour, I don’t even know anything about it.”

“You were seen.”

"Me? I was seen? Who saw me then?"

"M. Malandain, the harness-maker."

Then the old man remembered, understood, and flushing with anger, he said :

"Oh! he saw me, did he, that scoundrel!" He saw me picking up this piece of string here, look, Mr. Mayor."

And, rummaging in the depths of his pocket, he drew out the little bit of string.

But the Mayor, incredulous, shook his head.

"You are not going to make me believe, Maître Hauchecorne, that M. Malandain, who is a man to be trusted, took this string for a wallet?"

Angry, the peasant raised his hand, spat to the side to attest his honour, and repeated :

"All the same, it's God's truth, the sacred truth, Mr. Mayor. There, on my soul and my salvation, I repeat it."

The Mayor continued :

"After picking up the object, you even looked in the mud for a long time to make sure that no money had dropped out."

The old fellow choked with indignation and fear :

"How could he say that! How could he tell . . . tell lies like that to misrepresent an honest man. How could he say that!"

It was no use his protesting : nobody believed him.

He was confronted with M. Malandain, who repeated and upheld his statement. They abused each other for a whole hour. At his own request they searched Maître Hauchecorne. They found nothing on him.

At last, the Mayor, greatly perplexed, sent him away, warning him that he was going to inform the public prosecutor and ask for orders.

The news had spread. On his leaving the town hall, the old man was surrounded, questioned with serious or chaffing curiosity, in which, however, there was no indignation. And he began to tell the story of the piece of string. They didn't believe him. They laughed.

He went along, stopped by everyone, halting his acquaintances, repeatedly beginning his story and his protests all over again, showing his turned-out pockets to prove that he had nothing.

They said to him :

“Go on ! you sly old thing !”

And he would get angry, becoming exasperated, fevered and desolated at not being believed, not knowing what to do, and still relating his story.

Night had fallen. It was time to go. He set out with three neighbours, to whom he showed the spot where he had picked up his piece of string; and the whole length of the way he talked about his adventure.

In the evening he went for a turn round the village of Bréauté, to tell his story to everybody. He found them all incredulous.

He was ill with it the whole night.

The next day, about one o'clock in the afternoon, Marius Paumelle, farm-hand of Maître Breton, cultivator of Ymauville, returned the pocket-book and its contents to Maître Houlbrèque of Manneville.

This man claimed to have indeed found the object on the road; but, not knowing how to read, he had brought it back to the house, and given it

to his master.

The news spread throughout the district. He immediately took a turn in the village and began to relate his story complete with ending. He exulted — “What made me sad,” he said, “was not so much the thing itself; but it was the lying. Nothing hurts you more than to be blamed because of a lie.”

All day long, he talked of his adventure, narrating it on the roads to people passing by, in the inn to the people drinking, and on coming out of church the following Sunday. He stopped strangers to tell them about it. Now he was calm, and yet something worried him, without his exactly knowing what it was. People seemed to jeer when they listened to him. They did not appear convinced. He thought he felt remarks being made behind his back.

On the Tuesday of the following week, he repaired to the market at Goderville, urged solely by the need to relate his case.

Malandain, standing at his door, began to laugh on seeing him pass. Why?

He accosted a farmer from Criquetot, who did not let him finish, and, giving him a tap in the pit of his stomach, cried in his face: “Go on, you great rascal!” — then turned on his heels.

Maître Hauchecorne stood bewildered, feeling more and more uneasy. Why had he been called a “great rascal”?

When he was seated at table in Jourdain’s inn, he again began to explain the affair.

A horse-dealer from Montivilliers shouted to him:

“Come on! Come on! you old scoundrel! I

know you and your piece of string!"

Hauchecorne stammered :

"But . . . anyway . . . they found the wallet again!"

The other replied :

"Oh! shut up, daddy, there's one who found it and one who returned it. Nobody saw and nobody knew—do I make myself clear?"

The peasant felt he was choking. He realised at last. They were accusing him of having had the wallet taken back by a confederate, an accomplice.

He wanted to protest. The whole table began to laugh.

He could not finish his dinner, and went off, pursued by jeers.

He returned home, shame-faced and indignant, choked with anger and confusion, all the more overwhelmed because, with his Norman artfulness, he was capable of doing what he had been accused of, and even boasting about it as if it were a clever trick. His innocence seemed to him somehow impossible to prove, as his malice was well-known. And he felt smitten in his heart by the injustice of the suspicion.

Then he began to relate his adventure again, lengthening his account every day, every time adding new reasons, more emphatic protests, more solemn oaths, which he thought up and prepared in his hours of solitude, his mind being solely occupied by the story of the piece of string. They believed him all the less as his defence grew more complicated and his arguments more subtle.

"Those are a liar's excuses," they said behind his back.

He felt it, fretted, and exhausted himself in useless efforts.

He was visibly wasting away.

Wags now made him tell the story of "The Piece of String" to amuse themselves, as one makes an old campaigner tell the tale of his battle. Wounded to the quick his spirit was declining.

Towards the end of December, he took to his bed.

He died early in January, and, in the delirium of the death pangs, he attested his innocence, repeating:

"A li'l' piece of string . . . look, here it is, Mr. Mayor."

WAITER, A BEER !

*To José Maria de
Hérédia*

WHY did I go into that bar that evening? I have no idea. It was cold. A fine rain, a wet haze, hovered in the air, veiled the gas-jets with transparent mist, made the pavements glitter, streaked as they were by the glare of the shop-windows, which lit up the wet mud, and the dirty shoes of the passers-by.

I was going nowhere in particular. I was taking a little walk after dinner. I passed the Crédit Lyonnais, the Rue Vivienne, and still more streets. I suddenly saw a large *brasserie*, half full. For no reason I went in. I was not thirsty.

I glanced round for a spot where I would not be too crowded, and I took my seat beside a man who seemed to me old, and was smoking a cheap, clay pipe, as black as coal. Six or eight beermats, piled on the table in front of him, indicated the number of beers he had already imbibed. I did not scrutinise my neighbour. At a glance I had recognised a beer-soaker, one of those bar-frequenters who arrive in the morning, when they open, and leave at night, when they close. He was dirty, and bald in the centre of his head, whilst long, greasy, grizzly hair fell over the collar of his frock-coat. His clothes, which were too loose, seemed to have been made at a time when he was well covered. One guessed that the trousers hardly kept them-

selves up, and that this man could hardly take ten steps without adjusting and hitching up this badly fitting garment. Had he a waistcoat? The mere thought of the boots, and what they enclosed, terrified me. The frayed cuffs were completely black at the edge, as were his nails.

As soon as I had sat down beside him, this person said to me in a quiet voice : "You getting on well?"

I turned towards him with a start and stared him in the face. He went on : "You don't recognise me?"

"No!"

"Des Barrets."

I was stupefied. It was Count Jean des Barrets, my old school-friend.

I shook hands with him, so thunderstruck that I could find nothing to say.

At last I stammered : "And you, how are you getting on?"

He calmly replied : "I? I get along."

He was silent. I wanted to be friendly and sought round for a phrase :

"And . . . what are you doing?"

He answered with resignation :

"You can see."

I felt myself blush. I persisted :

"But every day?"

Puffing out thick clouds of smoke, he said : "Every day it's the same."

Then, rapping on the marble top of the table with a sou that was lying about, he cried : "Waiter, two beers!"

A far-off voice repeated : "Two beers for number four!" Another voice, yet more distant, utter-

ed a very shrill : "Here it comes !" Then a man in a white apron appeared, carrying two glasses of beer, from which, in his haste, he split yellow drops on to the sandy floor.

Des Barrets emptied his glass at one draught, and put it back on the table, whilst he sucked in the froth which had remained on his moustache.

Then he asked : "And what's your news?"

I had no news to give him, to tell the truth. I stammered : "why, nothing much, old chap. I'm in business."

In his still unmoved voice he said : "And . . . you find that amusing?"

"No, but what can one do? One must do something!"

"How is that?"

"Why . . . to keep oneself occupied,"

"What use is it? I do nothing, as you see, nothing . . . ever. When one hasn't a sou, I can understand the need to work. When one has enough to live on, it's unnecessary. What's the good of working? Do you do it for yourself or for others? If you do it for yourself, you must find it amusing, so that's all right; if you do it for others, you're just an idiot."

Then, putting his pipe down on the marble top, he cried again : "Waiter, a beer !" and continued : "It makes me thirsty, talking. I'm not used to it. Yes, me, I do nothing, I let myself drift along, I grow old. When I die, I shall regret nothing. I shall have no other memory but this bar. No wife, no children, no worries, no sorrows, nothing. That is better."

He emptied the glass of beer which had been

brought to him, passed his tongue over his lips and took up his pipe again.

I looked at him with amazement. I asked him :

“But you weren’t always like this?”

“I’m sorry, yes, always, since my school days.”

“But this is no life, old fellow. It’s horrible. Come, you surely do something, you like something, you have friends.”

“No, I get up at mid-day. I come here, I have lunch, I drink beer, I wait for the evening, I dine, I drink beer; then about half-past one in the morning I go back to sleep because they close. That’s what vexes me most. In the last ten years I must surely have spent six years on this bench, in my corner; and the remainder in my bed, never anywhere else. I sometimes chat with the regulars who come here.”

“But when you came to Paris, what did you do first of all?”

“I read my law—at the Café de Médicis.”

“But afterwards?”

“Afterwards . . . I travelled abroad, and I came here.”

“Why did you take this trouble?”

“What could I do? One can’t stay all one’s life in the Latin Quarter. The students make too much noise. Now I shan’t move any more. Waiter, a beer!”

I thought he was making fun of me. I persisted.

“Come, be frank. You have had some great sorrow? A disappointment in love, no doubt? You must certainly be a man stricken by misfortune. How old are you?”

“I’m thirty-three. But I look at least forty-five.”

I looked straight at him closely. His wrinkled, ill-groomed face seemed almost that of an old man. On the top of his head, a few long, grey hairs straggled over the skin of dubious cleanliness. He had enormous eyebrows, a bushy moustache and a thick beard. Suddenly I had a vision, I know not why, of a bowl full of blackish water, the water in which all this hair might have been washed.

I said to him : "You really do look older than your age. You must certainly have had sorrows to bear."

He replied : "I assure you I haven't. I am old because I never take the air. Nothing makes people deteriorate as much as *café* life."

I couldn't believe him : "Then you must have led a gay life. One doesn't get bald as you are without having loved a lot."

He quietly shook his head, sprinkling on to his back the little white things which fell from his last hairs : "No, I've always been steady." And, raising his eyes to the gas-light which warmed our heads, he said : "If I'm bald, it's the fault of the gas. It is the enemy of hair,—Waiter, a beer!—You're not thirsty?"

"No thanks. But really you interest me. Since when did you feel such despondency? It isn't normal, it isn't natural. There's something behind it."

"Yes, it dates from my childhood. I received a shock, when I was small, and that turned me to the dark side of life for the rest of my days."

"What was that?"

"You want to know? Listen. You must remember the château where I was brought up, since you

came there five or six times during the holidays. You remember that big, grey building, in the middle of a large park, and the long avenues of oak-trees, open to the four points of the compass ! You remember my father and mother, both formal, solemn and severe.

“I adored my mother, feared my father, and respected both, accustomed as I was, besides, to seeing everyone bow before them. In the district they were Monsieur the Count and Madame the Countess ; and our neighbours too, the Tannemares, the Ravelets and the Brennevilles, showed my parents special consideration.

“I was then thirteen. I was cheerful, pleased with everything, as one is at that age, full of the joy of living.

“Well, towards the end of September, a few days before my return to school, when I was playing at wolves in the groves of the park, running between the branches and the leaves, I saw mother and father crossing the avenue, out for a walk.

“I can remember it as if it were yesterday. It was a very windy day. The whole line of trees bent under the gusts of wind, groaned, and seemed to utter cries, those dull, deep cries which forests emit in storms.

“The torn-off leaves, already yellow, flew away like birds, whirled in the air, fell, and then ran the length of the alley just like fleet animals.

“Evening was approaching. It was dark in the thickets. This stirring of the wind and the branches excited me, made me gallop like a mad man, and howl to imitate the wolves.

“As soon as I caught sight of my parents, I went

towards them with stealthy steps, underneath the branches, to surprise them, as if I had been a real prowler.

“But I stopped, seized with fear, a few paces away from them. My father, in the grip of a terrible rage, was crying :

“Your mother is a fool ; and, besides, it doesn’t concern your mother, but you. I tell you I need this money and I mean you to sign.’

“Mother replied in a firm voice :

“I will not sign. It is Jean’s property, that, I am keeping it for him and I don’t want you to squander it again with women and maidservants, as you did your inheritance.’

“Then father, trembling with rage, turned round, and, seizing his wife by the neck, he began to strike her with his other hand with all his might, full in the face.

“Mother’s hat fell off, her untied hair came down ; she tried to ward off the blows, but could not succeed. And father, as if mad, went on hitting and hitting. She rolled on to the ground, hiding her face in her two arms. Then he turned her over on her back to beat her again, tearing aside the hands with which she was covering her face.

“As for me, my dear fellow, it seemed that the world was going to end, that eternal laws had changed. I experienced the utter overthrow one feels before supernatural things, before monstrous catastrophes, before irreparable disasters. My child’s head was bewildered and deranged. And I began to scream with all my might, without knowing why, a prey to fearful dismay, anguish and terror. My father heard me, turned round, saw me, and, getting up, came

towards me. I thought he was going to kill me, and I fled like a hunted animal, running straight in front of me, into the wood.

"I went on for perhaps an hour—perhaps two—I don't know. Night having come, I fell on to the grass, and I stayed there, distracted, consumed with fear, tormented with anguish that was capable of breaking a child's heart for ever. I was cold, perhaps hungry. Day came. I did not dare get up, walk, return, or even escape, fearing to meet my father whom I never wanted to see again.

"I might have died of misery and hunger at the foot of my tree, if the game-keeper had not found me and taken me back by force.

"I found my parents with their ordinary appearance. My mother merely said to me: 'How you frightened me, you naughty boy, I didn't sleep the whole night.' I did not answer but began to cry. My father did not utter a word.

"A week later I went back to school.

"Well, my dear fellow, it was all over for me. I had seen the other side of things, the bad; I have not seen the good side since that day. What happened in my mind? What strange phenomenon turned my ideas? I don't know. But I have no taste for anything any more, no wish for anything, no love for anybody, no desire whatsoever, no ambition, and no hope. And I keep on seeing my poor mother, on the ground, in the alley, with my father beating her unmercifully.—Mother died after a few years. My father is still alive. I haven't seen him again.—Waiter, a beer!"

They brought him a glass of beer which he gulped down at one draught. But, on taking up his

pipe, as he was trembling, he broke it. Then he made a despairing gesture and said : “Look ! that’s a real sorrow, that is, by Jove ! It’ll take me a month to break in a new one.”

And, across the huge room, now full of smoke and drinkers, he sent his eternal cry : “Waiter, a beer—and a new pipe !”

THE CHRISTENING

To Guillemet

IN front of the farmhouse door the men were waiting, dressed in their Sunday clothes. The May sun shed its bright light on to the blossoming apple-trees, round like huge, pink and white, scented nosegays, covering the entire courtyard with a roof of flowers. They sprinkled an incessant snow of tiny petals around them, which fluttered and whirled as they fell into the tall grass, where the dandelions shone like flames, and the poppies seemed like drops of blood.

A sow was dozing on the edge of the dunghill, with its huge belly and swollen udders, whilst a troop of little pigs turned around it, with their tails curled up like cords.

Suddenly, some way off, behind the trees of the farms, the church-bell sounded. Its iron voice sent forth its feeble, distant cry into the joyful sky. Swallows darted like arrows across the blue space enclosed by the great, motionless beech-trees. The smell of stables was everywhere, mingled with the sweet and honeyed perfumes of the apple-trees.

One of the men standing before the door turned towards the house, and cried :

“Come on, Mélina, come on, the bell’s ringing !”

He was perhaps thirty, a tall peasant, whom the laborious work in the fields had not bent or deformed. An old man, his father, gnarled as the trunk of an oak-tree, with knobbly wrists and crooked

legs, declared: "Women are never ready, any-way."

The two other sons of the old man began to laugh, and one of them, turning to his elder brother, who had called out first, said to him: "Go and fetch them, Polyte. They won't be ready before mid-day."

And the young man went into his house.

A troop of ducks, which had stopped near the peasants, began to quack, beating their wings; then they went off in the direction of the pond, with their slow, waddling gait.

Then, in the doorway which had been left open, a stout woman appeared, carrying a two-months-old baby. The white strings of her high bonnet hung over her back, falling on to a red shawl, vivid as flame, and the child, enveloped in white linen, reposed on the nurse's protruding belly.

Then the mother, tall and robust, came out in her turn, hardly eighteen years old, fresh and smiling, holding her husband's arm. And the two grandmothers came next, withered like old apples, with evident fatigue in their distorted backs, long twisted by patient and rough work. One of them was a widow; she took the arm of the grand-father, who was standing in front of the door, and they left at the head of the procession, behind the child and the midwife. And the rest of the family set out in their wake. The younger ones carried paper-bags full of sugared almonds.

In the distance, the little bell rang without pause, calling the frail, awaited baby, with all its might. Urchins climbed on to the banks by the road; people appeared at fences; farm-girls remained stand-

ing between two pails full of milk, which they had put on the ground to look at the christening.

And the nurse, triumphant, carried her living burden, avoided the pools of water in the sunken paths, between the sloping banks planted with trees. And the old men came on ceremoniously, walking a little askew, because of their age and their aches; and the young ones wanted to dance, and looked at the girls who had come to see them pass; and the father and mother walked on gravely, more serious, following their child who would replace them later in life, who would continue their name in the district, the name of Dentu, well-known throughout the canton.

They came out into the open country and took the path across the fields, in order to avoid the long, roundabout way of the road.

They could see the church now with its pointed steeple. It was pierced by an opening just beneath the slate roof; and something was moving inside it, going and coming with a brisk motion, passing to and fro behind the narrow window. It was the bell, which was still ringing, crying to the new-born to come for the first time, into the House of God.

A dog had begun to follow. They threw it sugared almonds, and it frisked about the people.

The church door was open. The priest, a tall fellow, with red hair, lean and strong, a Dentu as well, uncle of the little one, yet another brother of the father, was waiting before the altar. And, according to the rites, he christened his nephew Prosper-César, the latter beginning to cry when he tasted the symbolic salt.

When the ceremony was over, the family waited on the threshold whilst the priest took off his sur-

pliance ; then they set out again. They walked quickly now, for they were thinking about dinner. All the brats of the neighbourhood were following now, and every time they were thrown a handful of sweets, there were furious scuffles, hand-to-hand fights, and torn hair ; and the dog also threw itself into the struggling heap to pick up the sweetmeats, pulled by the tail, by the ears, and by the paws, but more persistent than the urchins.

The nurse, a little weary, said to the priest who was walking beside her :

“I say, Monsieur le curé, would you mind taking your nephew from me for a bit while I stretch myself ? I’ve almost got cramp in my stomach.”

The priest took the child, whose white clothes made a great, dazzling, white splash on the black cassock, and he kissed it, uncomfortable with this light burden, not knowing how to hold it or where to place it. Everyone began to laugh. One of the grand-mothers asked from a distance :

“Don’t you feel sorry, Parson, that you will never have anything like that ?”

The priest did not reply. He walked with long strides, looking steadfastly at the blue-eyed brat, whose round cheeks he wanted to kiss again. He could no longer resist, and, lifting the child up to his face, he gave it a long kiss.

The father cried :

“Hi, Parson ! If you want one, you’ve only got to say.”

And they began to joke, as the people of the fields joke.

As soon as they had sat down to table, the gross, country mirth burst like a storm. The other two

sons were going to be married also; their betrothed were there, having come only for the meal; and the guests did not cease darting allusions at all the future generations these unions promised.

They were coarse remarks, extremely low, which made the blushing girls giggle, and the men writhe. They banged with their fists on the table, and uttered cries. The father and the grand-mother never ceased making lewd observations. The mother smiled; the old women took part in the mirth, and added their share of suggestive remarks.

The priest, used to these peasant revels, sat quietly by the side of the nurse, teasing the little mouth of his nephew with his finger to make him laugh. He seemed surprised at the sight of this child, as if he had never seen one before. He gazed at it with meditative attention, with thoughtful gravity, with a tenderness awakened in the depths of him, an unknown tenderness, strange, passionate, and a little sad, for this small, fragile being who was the son of his brother.

He heard nothing, he saw nothing, he was gazing at the child. He wanted to take it on his knees again, for, on his chest and in his heart, he could still feel the sweet sensation from having carried it just before, on their way back from the church.

He was moved by this embryo of a man, as if in the presence of an ineffable mystery, of which he had never dreamed, an august and holy mystery, the incarnation of a new soul, the great mystery of life which is just beginning, of love which is awakening, of the race which is perpetuated, and humanity which still strides on.

The nurse was eating, red in the face, her eyes

shining, inconvenienced by the child which kept her away from the table. The priest said to her :

“Give him to me. I’m not hungry.”

And he took the child again. Then everything disappeared around him, everything vanished ; and he sat with eyes fixed on this pink and puffy face ; and, gradually, the warmth of the little body, through the swaddling cloths and the material of the cassock, reached his legs, went through him like a very soft caress, very good, very chaste, a sweet caress that brought the tears to his eyes.

The noise of the diners was becoming alarming. The child, irritated by these shouts, began to cry.

A voice exclaimed :

“I say, Parson, give it the breast.”

And an explosion of laughter shook the room. But the mother had got up ; she took her son, and bore him away into the next room. She came back after a few minutes declaring that he was sleeping peacefully in his cradle.

And the meal continued. Men and women from time to time went out into the yard, then came back to the table again. Meat, vegetables, cider and wine disappeared down their gullets, swelled their bellies, lit up their eyes, and made them light-headed.

Night was falling when they took coffee. The priest had disappeared a long time ago, without anyone being surprised at his absence.

The young mother at last got up to go and see if the baby was still asleep. It was dark now. She groped her way into the bedroom ; and she went forward with her arms outstretched, so that she should not stumble against any furniture. But a strange noise stopped her dead ; and she came out again, ter-

rified, sure that she had heard someone moving about. She went back to the parlour, very pale and trembling, and related what had happened. All the men got up in a tumult, tipsy and menacing; and the father, a lamp in his hand, rushed forward.

The priest, on his knees near the cradle, was sobbing, his brow on the pillow where the child's head was lying.

REGRET

To Léon Dier

M. SAVAL, known in Mantes as Papa Saval, has just got up. It is raining. A sad autumn day ; the leaves are falling. They fall slowly in the rain, like another heavier, more sluggish rain. M. Saval is not cheerful. He walks from his fire-place to his window and from his window to his fire-place. Life has its dark days. It will have nothing but dark days for him now, for he is sixty-two ! He is alone, an old bachelor, with no one around him. How sad it is to die like this, all alone, with no tender devotion !

He thinks of his existence, so bare and so empty. In the distant past, in the past of his childhood, he recalls the house, the house with his parents ; then school, the outings, the time he spent in Paris studying law. Then his father's illness and his death.

He came back to live with his mother. Both of them, young man and old woman, lived peacefully without wanting anything more. She died too. How sad life is !

He has been left alone. And now he will soon die in his turn. He too will disappear and it will be over. There will be no more M. Paul Saval on the earth. What a dreadful thought ! Other people will live and love and laugh. Yes, they will enjoy themselves, and he, for his part, will no longer exist ! How strange it is that one can laugh, enjoy oneself and be joyful under the shadow of this eternal certainty of death. If it were merely probable,

this death, one could still hope; but no, it was inevitable, as inevitable as night after day.

If again his life had been fulfilled! If he had done something; if he had had adventures, great pleasures, successes, satisfactions of any kind. But no, nothing. He had done nothing, never anything but get up, eat, always at the same hours, and go to bed. And in this way he had come to the age of sixty-two. He hadn't even married, like other men. Why? Yes, why hadn't he married? He could have done, for he had some means. Was it the opportunity that had been lacking? Perhaps! But one makes opportunities! He was indifferent, that's what it was. Indifference had been his great evil, his failing, his vice. How many people wreck their lives through indifference! It is so difficult for some natures to get up, bestir themselves, take action, talk, ponder over questions.

He had not even been loved. No woman had slept on his breast in the complete abandon of love. He did not know the sweet anguish of waiting, the divine quiver of the pressed hand, the ecstasy of triumphant passion.

What superhuman happiness must flood the heart when lips meet for the first time, when the clasping of four arms makes one single being, a being sovereignly happy, made up of two beings madly in love with each other!

M. Saval had sat down, his feet stretched towards the fire, in a dressing-gown.

His life was wrecked, completely wrecked. Yet he had loved. He had loved secretly, sorrowfully and indifferently, as he did everything. Yes, he had loved his old friend, Madame Sandres, the wife of

his old comrade Sandres. Ah! if only he had known her as a girl! But he had met her too late; she was already married. Yes, he would certainly have asked for *her* hand! But how he had loved her, without respite, from the very first day!

He recalled his emotion every time he saw her again, his moments of sadness when he left her, the nights when he could not sleep because he was thinking of her.

In the morning, he would always wake up a little less in love than the evening before. Why?

How pretty she was in those days, dainty, with fair, curly hair and always laughing. Sandres was not the man she should have had. Now she was fifty-eight. She seemed happy. Ah! if only she had loved him in those days: if only she had loved him! And why shouldn't she have loved him, him, Saval, since he had loved her dearly, her, Mme. Sandres?

If only she had sensed something . . . Had she sensed nothing, had she seen nothing, had she never realised anything? What would she have thought then? If he had spoken, what would she have replied?

And Saval asked himself a thousand other things. He lived his life over again, trying to recapture a multitude of details.

He remembered all the long, quiet evenings at Sandres' house, when his wife was young and so charming.

He remembered things she had said to him, the intonations she used to have, quiet little smiles which signified so many thoughts.

He remembered their outings along the Seine, the

three of them together, their lunches on the grass on Sundays, for Sandres was an official at the subprefecture. And suddenly the vivid remembrance came back to him of an afternoon spent with her in a little wood along by the river.

They had set out in the morning, taking their food with them in packages. It was a bright spring day, one of those days which intoxicate one. Everything smells good, everything seems happy. The birds' calls are gayer, and their wing beats more rapid. They had eaten on the grass, under the willows, right near the water made torpid by the sun. The air was balmy, full of the odours of sap; they drank it in with delight. How lovely it was, that day!

After lunch, Sandres had gone to sleep on his back: "The best nap in his life," he had said when he woke up.

Mme. Sandres had taken Saval's arm and they had gone off, both of them, along the river bank.

She leaned on him. She laughed and said: "I am drunk, my friend, absolutely drunk." He looked at her, quivering to his very heart, feeling himself grow pale, fearing that his eyes might be too bold, that a trembling of his hand might reveal his secret.

She had made herself a coronet of long grasses and water lilies, and had asked him:

"Do you like me, like this?"

As he said nothing in reply—for he had found no answer he would rather have fallen on his knees—and she had begun to laugh, a dissatisfied laugh, hurling in his face: "Go on! you great stupid! At least you can talk!"

He had nearly wept without yet finding a single word.

All this came back to him now, as clear as on the first day! Why had she said that to him: "Go on! you great stupid! At least you can talk!"

And he recalled how she had leaned tenderly on him. Passing under an overhanging tree, he had felt her ear, hers, against his own cheek, his, and he had hastily drawn away, for fear she would think this contact intentional.

When he had said: "Isn't it time we went back?" she had darted a strange look at him. Yes, she had certainly looked at him in a curious fashion. He hadn't thought about it, then; and here he was remembering it now!

"As you wish, my friend. If you are tired, let's go back."

And he had replied:

"It's not that I am tired; but Sandres may have woken up by now."

And, shrugging her shoulders, she had said:

"If you are afraid my husband might have woken up, that's different; let's go back."

She was silent on the way back: and she no longer leaned on his arm. Why?

That "Why" he had never yet asked himself. Now he seemed to discern something that he had never understood.

Was it that . . . ?

M. Saval felt himself go red, and he stood up, distracted, as if, thirty years younger, he had heard Mme. Sandres say to him: "I love you!"

Was it possible? This suspicion which had just entered his mind was torturing him. Was it possible

that he had not seen, that he had not guessed?

Oh ! if it were true, if he had come close to this happiness and not seized it !

He said to himself : "I want to know, I can't remain in this doubt. I want to know."

And he quickly dressed, hastily throwing on his clothes. He was thinking : "I am sixty-two, she is fifty-eight ; I can certainly ask her that."

And he went out.

The Sandres' house was on the other side of the street, almost facing his own. He went straight there. The little maid-servant came to open the door at the sound of the knocker.

She was astonished to see him so early :

"You already, Monsieur Saval ? Has there been some accident ?"

Saval replied :

"No, my girl, but go and tell your mistress that I'd like to speak to her straight away."

"You see, Madame is making her stock of pear jam for the winter ; and she is in her kitchen ; and not dressed, you understand."

"Yes, but tell her it's about something very important."

The little maid went off, and Saval began to walk about the drawing-room, with long nervous strides. Yet he did not feel embarrassed. Oh ! he was going to ask her this as he would have asked her for a cooking recipé. After all he was sixty-two !

The door opened : she appeared. She was now a stout woman, plump and rounded, with full cheeks and a resonant laugh. She walked with her hands held away from her body, the sleeves rolled up over her bare arms, sticky with sugary juice.

She asked anxiously :

“—What’s the matter, my friend : You’re not ill?”

He replied :

“No, my dear friend, but I want to ask you something which means a lot to me and which is torturing my mind. Will you promise me to reply frankly?”

She smiled :

“I am always frank. Go on.”

“This is it. I have loved you from the day I first saw you. Did you ever suspect it?”

She replied laughingly, with something of the intonation of the old days :

“Go on ! You great stupid ! I could see it clearly from the first day !”

Saval began to tremble : he stammered :

“You knew it?—Then—”

And he was silent.

She asked :

“—Then?—What?”

He went on :

“—Then—what did you think?—what—what—What would you have replied?”

She laughed louder. Drops of syrup ran down to the ends of her fingers and dropped on to the floor.

“—I? But you didn’t ask me anything. It wasn’t up to me to make you a declaration.”

Then he took a step towards her :

“—Tell me—tell me—You remember that day when Sandres went to sleep on the grass after lunch —when we went off together, as far as the bend, some way off—?”

He waited. She had ceased laughing and was

looking him in the eyes :

“But of course, I remember.”

Quivering he went on :

“—Well—on that day—if I had been—enterprising—what would you have done?”

She began to smile again, as a woman who has no regrets, and she replied frankly, in a clear voice tinged with irony :

“I would have yielded, my friend.”

Then she turned on her heels and fled to her jams.

Saval went out into the street again, overwhelmed as after some disaster. With big strides, he walked straight on in the rain, descending to the river, without thinking where he was going. When he reached the bank, he turned to the right and followed it. He walked for a long time, as if urged on by an instinct. His clothes streamed with water, his misshapen hat, limp as a rag, dripped as a roof does. He went on walking, still straight on. And he found himself at the spot where they had lunched that far-off day, the remembrance of which was torturing his heart.

Then he sat down under the naked trees and wept.

MY UNCLE JULES

To M. Achille Bénouville

AN old, white-bearded beggar asked us for alms. My companion, Joseph Davranche, gave him five francs. I was surprised. He said to me :

“This poor fellow reminded me of a story which I am going to tell you, the memory of which pursues me always. This is it :

“My family, who came from Le Havre, were not rich. They managed, that was all. Father worked, came back late from office, and didn’t earn a great deal. I had two sisters.

“My mother suffered greatly from the straits we lived in, and she often found harsh words for her husband, veiled and perfidious reproaches. The poor man then made a gesture that used to break my heart. He passed his open hand over his forehead, as if to wipe off the sweat which was not there, and he said nothing. I felt his ineffectual suffering. Everything was skimped; no invitation to dinner was ever accepted, so that it should not have to be paid back; provisions of inferior quality were brought at reduced prices. My sisters made their own dresses, and held long discussions over the price of a piece of lace which was worth fifteen centimes a yard. Our usual food consisted of greasy soup and beef prepared with every kind of sauce. It’s all healthy and strengthening, it seems; I would have preferred something else.

“There were awful scenes if I lost a button or tore

my trousers.

"But every Sunday we went for our walk round the quayside in grand style. My father, in frock-coat, top-hat and gloves, would offer his arm to my mother, who was decked out like a vessel in a fleet review. My sisters, first to be ready, awaited the signal to depart; but, at the last moment, some forgotten stain would always be found on the head of the family's frock-coat, and it had to be removed quickly, with a rag soaked in benzine.

"My father, keeping his top-hat on his head, would wait, in shirt sleeves, until the operation was completed, whilst my mother would hurry, after adjusting her spectacles over her short-sighted eyes and taking off her gloves in order not to spoil them.

"We would set out with ceremony. My sisters walked in front, arm in arm. They were of marrying age and were on show to the town. I kept to the left of my mother while my father walked on her right. And I remember the pompous air of my poor parents on these Sunday outings, the rigidity of their features and the austerity of their gait. They stepped forward at a solemn pace, with upright body and stiff legs, as if some affair of extreme importance depended on their bearing.

"And every Sunday, when he saw the great ships come in, returning from unknown, distant countries, my father would invariably utter the same words :

" 'By Jove ! If Jules was on that, what a surprise it would be !'

"My uncle Jules, my father's brother, was the sole hope of the family, after having been its terror. I had heard him spoken about since my childhood,

and it seemed to me I would have recognised him at first sight, the thought of him had become so familiar to us. I knew all the details of his existence up to the day of his departure to America, although this period of his life was only spoken about in low voices.

“It seems that he had lived a wild life, that is to say, he had squandered some money, which is easily the greatest of crimes in poor families. With the rich, a man who has a good time ‘behaves foolishly.’ He is what one calls, smiling, a spark. With the needy, a young fellow who forces his relatives to make a hole in their capital becomes a bad hat, a scoundrel, a wretch !

“And this distinction is just, although the act is the same, for consequences alone determine the gravity of the deed.

“Anyway, Uncle Jules had considerably diminished the inheritance on which my father had been counting, after having squandered his own share to the last sou.

“They had put him on a vessel for America, as they did in those days, on a merchant-ship going from Le Havre to New York.

“Once over there, my uncle Jules had set himself up as a dealer in something or other, and he soon wrote to say he was making a little money and hoped to be able to compensate my father for the wrong he had done him. This letter caused profound emotion in the family. Jules, who, as they say, wasn’t worth a straw, suddenly became a decent fellow, a man of courage, a true Davranche, upright like all the Dav. ranches.

“A captain informed us, in addition, that he had

rented a big shop and was doing substantial business.

“A second letter, two years later, said : ‘My dear Philippe, I am writing to you so that you should not worry about my health, which is good. Business is also going well. I am leaving tomorrow on a long trip to South America. I might be several years without giving you my news. If I don’t write to you, don’t be worried. I shall come back to Le Havre one day with my fortune made. I hope it won’t be too long, and we shall live happily together. . . .’

“This letter had become the family gospel. It was read on every occasion, it was shown to everybody.

“Indeed, for ten years, there was no more news from Uncle Jules; but my father’s hope increased as time went on; and my mother, too, often said :

“‘When our good Jules is back, things will change. There’s somebody who knew how to get on !’

“And every Sunday, as they watched the big, black steamers coming from the horizon, vomiting serpents of smoke on to the sky, my father would repeat his eternal phrase : ‘By Jove ! If Jules was on that, what a surprise it would be !’

“And we almost expected to see him waving a handkerchief and crying :

“‘Hey ! Philippe !’

“A thousand schemes had been built up round this promised return; a little country-house near Ingouville was even to be bought with Uncle’s money. I would not vouch that my father had not already begun negotiations on this account.

"The elder of my sisters was then twenty-eight; the other twenty-six. They had not married, and that was a great sorrow to everyone.

"A suitor at last came on the scene for the younger. A clerk, not rich, but respectable. I have always had the conviction that Uncle Jules' letter, shown to him one evening, had put an end to his hesitations and decided the young man.

"He was accepted with alacrity, and it was decided that after the wedding the whole family would take a little trip together to Jersey.

"Jersey is the ideal trip for poor people. It is not far; you cross the sea in a packet-steamer and you are in a foreign land, as this small island belongs to the English. So, a Frenchman, after two hours' sailing, can treat himself to the sight of a neighbouring race in their own country, and observe the way of living (deplorable, nevertheless) in this island, sheltered under the British Flag, as people say, who talk with simplicity.

"This trip to Jersey became our pre-occupation, our one expectation, our dream of every moment.

"At last we set out. I can see it all as if it were yesterday: the steamer stoking up by the Granville quay; my father frantically supervising the embarkation of our three packages; my mother having anxiously taken the arm of my unmarried sister, who seemed lost since the departure of the other, like a chicken left alone without its brood; and, behind us, the newly married couple, who always kept in the rear, which made me often turn my head.

"The ship's siren went. We were on board, and the vessel, leaving the jetty, moved off on to a sea as

smooth as a green, marble table-top. We watched the shore recede, happy and proud like all those who seldom travel.

“My father stuck out his belly under his frock-coat, from which, that very morning, all the stains had been removed with care, and he spread around him that outing-day smell of benzine which made me recognise a Sunday.

“Suddenly he caught sight of two elegant ladies, to whom two gentlemen were offering oysters. A ragged, old sailor was opening the shells with a knife and passing them to the gentlemen, who then handed them to the ladies. They ate in a delicate fashion, holding the shell on a fine handkerchief, and bringing forward their mouths so that they should not soil their dresses. Then they drank the liquid with a quick, little movement, and threw the shell into the sea.

“My father was doubtless intrigued by this distinguished action of eating oysters on a ship under way. He found it good style, refined, superior, and he went up to my mother and sisters, asking :

“ ‘Would you like to have some oysters?’

“My mother hesitated, because of the expense; but my two sisters accepted straight away. My mother said in a cross voice :

“ ‘I’m afraid of upsetting my stomach. Just give them to the children, but not too many, you’ll make them ill.’

“Then, turning to me, she added :

“ ‘As for Joseph, he doesn’t need any; boys mustn’t be spoilt.’

“So I remained at my mother’s side, finding this distinction unjust. My eyes followed my father, who

was pompously conducting his two daughters and his son-in-law towards the ragged old sailor.

“The two ladies had just gone, and my father showed my sisters how to set about eating without letting the water spill; he even wanted to give a demonstration, and he took hold of an oyster. In trying to imitate the ladies, he immediately spilt all the liquid over his frock-coat, and I heard my mother murmuring.

“‘It would have been better to have stayed put.’

“But suddenly my father seemed to be uneasy; he drew a few paces away, looked hard at his family who were pressing round the oyster-man, and came towards us hastily. He seemed to me very pale, with strange eyes. He said in a low voice to my mother:

“‘It’s extraordinary how that man who is opening the oysters resembles Jules.’

“‘Thunderstruck, my mother asked:

“‘What Jules?’

“My father went on:

“‘Why—my brother—if I didn’t know he was well established in America, I would have thought it was he.’

“‘Bewildered, my mother stammered:

“‘You are mad! When you know very well it isn’t he, why do you say stupid things like that?’

“But my father insisted:

“‘Go and see him then, Clarisse; I’d rather you made sure for yourself, with your own eyes.’

“She got up and went to join her daughters. I too looked at the man. He was old, dirty, all wrinkled, and did not raise his eyes from his work.

“My mother came back. I saw that she was

trembling. She said very quickly :

“ ‘I think it’s he. Go and make enquiries from the captain. Above all be discreet, so that this scamp isn’t landed on us again now !’

“ My father went off, but I followed him. I felt myself strangely moved.

“ The captain, a tall gentleman, thin, with long side-whiskers, was walking up and down the bridge, with an important air, as if he were commanding the East India packet.

“ My father addressed him with ceremony, questioning him about his work to the accompaniment of compliments :

“ What was the importance of Jersey? Its products? Its population? Its ways of living? Its customs? The nature of the soil, etc., etc. One would have thought he was at least talking about the United States of America.

“ Then they talked about the vessel they were on, the *Express*; then they came to the crew. At last my father, in a nervous voice, said :

“ ‘You’ve got an old oyster-man there who seems very interesting. Do you know anything about the old fellow?’

“ The captain, whom this conversation was beginning to irritate, bluntly replied :

“ ‘He’s an old French vagrant whom I picked up last year in America, and repatriated. It seems he has relatives in Le Havre, but he doesn’t want to go back to them, because he owes them money. He’s called Jules . . . Jules Davranche or Darvanche, something like that anyway. It seems that he was rich for a short while over there, but you see what he’s reduced to now.’

“My father, who had become livid, his throat constricted, and his eyes haggard, brought out :

“‘Ah ! ah !—yes,—of course—very well. That doesn’t surprise me. . . . Thank you very much, captain.’

“And he walked away, whilst the seafaring-man watched him move off with astonishment.

“He came back to my mother, so upset that she said to him :

“‘Sit down ; people will notice something.’

“He collapsed on to the bench, stammering,

“‘It’s him, it’s him all right.’

“Then he asked :

“‘What are we going to do?’

“She replied sharply :

“‘We must get the children away. As Joseph knows everything, he will go and fetch them. We must be careful, above all, that our son-in-law doesn’t suspect anything.’

“My father seemed to be struck all of a heap. He murmured :

“‘What a catastrophe !’

“My mother, who had suddenly become furious, added :

“‘I always had a feeling that thief would do nothing, and would be landed on us again ! As if one could expect anything from a Davranche . . . !’

“And my father passed his hand over his brow, as he did when his wife reproached him.

“She added :

“‘Give some money to Joseph so that he can go and pay for the oysters first. It would be the finishing stroke if we were to be recognised by this beggar. That would make a wonderful impression on the

boat. Let's go to the other end, and make sure that that man doesn't come anywhere near us.'

"She got up, and they moved away, after handing me a five-franc piece.

"My sisters, surprised, were waiting for their father. I stated that mother had felt a little upset by the sea, and I asked the oyster-opener :

"How much do we owe you, Monsieur?"

"I had a mind to say : 'Uncle.'

"He replied :

"Two francs fifty."

"I handed him five francs and he gave me the change.

"I looked at his hand, a poor sailor's hand, all wrinkled, and I looked at his face, an old, miserable face, sad and dejected, saying to myself :

"He's my uncle, papa's brother, my uncle."

"I tipped him ten sous. He thanked me : 'God bless you, young sir !' with the intonation of a beggar receiving alms. I thought he must have begged over there !

"My sisters gazed at me, stupefied at my generosity.

"When I handed two francs back to my father, my mother, surprised, asked :

"It came to three francs? . . . It isn't possible."

"In a firm voice I declared :

"I tipped him ten sous."

"My mother started and looked me in the eyes :

"You are mad ! You gave ten sous to that man, that ragamuffin !"

"She stopped at a look from my father, who indicated his son-in-law.

"Then they were silent.

“In front of us, on the horizon, a purple shadow seemed to emerge from the sea. It was Jersey.

“When we were drawing near the quayside, a violent desire came to my heart to see my Uncle Jules once more, to go up to him, to say something consoling to him, something tender.

“But as no one was eating oysters any more, he had disappeared, gone below, doubtless, into the filthy hold where the wretch lived.

“And we came back by the Saint-Malo boat in order not to meet him. My mother was consumed with anxiety.

“I never saw my father’s brother again !

“That is why you will sometimes see me giving five francs to beggars.”

IN THE TRAIN

To Gustave Toudouze

THE carriage was full up from Cannes onwards; we were chatting, everybody knowing everybody else. When we passed Tarascon, someone said: "It's here they're having those murders." And we began to talk about the mysterious murderer who had eluded capture and who, for the last two years, had from time to time made a traveller his victim. Everyone made suppositions, everyone gave his opinion; shivering, the women looked out into the dark night outside the windows, fearing that they might suddenly see a man's face at the door. And we began to tell frightening stories of unpleasant encounters, being alone with a mad man in the express, hours spent facing a suspicious-looking person.

Each man knew some anecdote to his credit, each had cowed, floored or pinioned some malefactor in surprising circumstances with admirable presence of mind and audacity. A doctor, who spent every winter in the South, wanted to relate an adventure in his turn:

"As for me," he said, "I have never had the chance to try out my courage in an affair of this sort; but I knew a woman, one of my patients, who died today, to whom there happened the strangest and also the most mysterious and touching thing in the world.

"She was a Russian, Countess Marie Baranov, a noble lady, of exquisite beauty. You know how

beautiful Russian women are, or at least how they seem beautiful to us, with their finely-shaped nose and delicate mouth, their close-set eyes, of indefinable colour, a blue-grey, and their cold and rather stiff charm. There is something wicked and seductive about them, something haughty yet sweet, something tender yet severe, which is altogether charming to a Frenchman. At bottom it is perhaps merely the difference in race and type which makes me see so much in them.

“For several years her doctor had seen that her chest was in danger and tried to persuade her to come to the south of France; but she stubbornly refused to leave St. Petersburg. Eventually, last autumn, considering her doomed, the doctor warned the husband, who immediately ordered his wife to leave for Menton.

“She took the train, and had a carriage to herself, her servants occupying another compartment. She sat near the window, a little sad, watching the fields and villages go by, feeling very lonely, deserted in her life, with no children, almost no relatives, and a husband whose love was dead and who was dispatching her thus to the end of the world without coming with her, as one sends a sick menial to the hospital.

“At every station, her servant Ivan came to enquire if his mistress needed anything. He was an old servant, blindly devoted, and ready to carry out any order she might give him.

“Night fell and the train ran on at full speed. She could not sleep, her nerves completely exhausted. Suddenly the idea came to her of counting the money her husband had given her, at the last

moment, in French gold. She opened her little bag and emptied the gleaming flood of metal on to her knees.

“But suddenly a breath of cold air struck her face. Surprised, she lifted her head. The door of the compartment had just opened. In dismay the Countess Marie hastily threw a shawl over the money spread out on her dress, and waited. A few seconds elapsed, then a man appeared, bare-headed, wounded in the hand, and panting, in evening-dress. He closed the door again, sat down, looked at his neighbour with gleaming eyes, then wrapped a handkerchief round his wrist, from which the blood was flowing.

“The young woman felt herself fainting with terror. This man had naturally seen her counting her gold, and had come to rob her and kill her.

“He was still staring hard at her, breathless, his features distorted, ready to leap on her without a doubt.

“Suddenly he said :

“ ‘Madame, do not be afraid.’

“She said nothing in reply, incapable of opening her mouth, hearing the beating of her heart and a buzzing in her ears.

“He went on :

“ ‘I am not a criminal, Madame.’

“She still said nothing, but in the abrupt movement she made, her knees coming together, her gold began to stream down on to the carpet, as the water streams from a gutter.

“The man, surprised, looked at this torrent of gold, and he suddenly bent down to pick it up. She got up, terrified, throwing all her wealth on to the floor, and ran to the door to throw herself out on to

the track. But he realised what she was going to do, rushed forward, seized her in his arms, forced her to sit down, and, holding her by the wrists, he said: 'Listen to me, Madame, I am not a criminal, and the proof is that I am going to pick up this money and give it back to you. But I am a doomed man, a dead man, if you don't help me to get over the frontier. I can't tell you any more. In one hour we shall be at the last Russian station; in an hour and twenty minutes, we shall cross the boundary of the Empire. If you don't help me, I am lost. And yet, Madame, I have not killed, robbed, or done anything dishonourable. That I swear to you. I can't tell you any more.'

"And, getting down on his knees, he picked up the gold even under the seats, looking for the last coins which had rolled far away. Then, when the little leather bag was full again, he handed it back to his neighbour, without adding a word, and he turned back to take his seat in the far corner of the compartment.

"Neither one nor the other made any further movement. She sat motionless and silent, still faint with terror, but gradually calming down. As for him, he did not make a gesture or a movement; he sat straight up, his eyes fixed in front of him, very pale, as if he were dead. From time to time she would dart a quick look at him, hastily averted. He was a man of about thirty, very handsome, with all the appearance of an aristocrat.

"The train ran through the darkness, and hurled its piercing cries into the night, slowing down sometimes, then setting off again at full speed. But suddenly its space slackened, it whistled several times,

and stopped altogether.

“Ivan appeared at the door to take any orders.

“Countess Marie, her voice trembling, looked at her strange companion for a last time, then said to her servant in an abrupt tone :

“ ‘Ivan, you will go back to the Count; I don’t need you any more.’

“Thunderstruck, the man opened his eyes wide. He stammered : ‘—But—Countess.’

“She went on :

“ ‘No, you are not coming. I have changed my mind. I want you to stay in Russia. Look, here’s some money for going back. Give me your hat and cloak.’

“The old servant, bewildered, took off his hat and handed over his cloak, always obeying without replying, accustomed to the sudden desires and irresistible whims of masters. And he went off, tears in his eyes.

“The train started again, running towards the frontier.

“Then Countess Marie said to her neighbour :

“ ‘These things are for you, Monsieur, you are Ivan my servant. I make only one condition in what I am doing : it is that you will never speak to me, that you will never say a word to me, neither to thank me, nor for anything whatsoever.’

“The stranger inclined his head, without uttering a word.

“Soon they stopped again, and uniformed officials inspected the train. The Countess handed them the papers, and, pointing to the man sitting at the far end of the compartment, she said :

“ ‘That is my servant, Ivan : this is his passport.’

“The train continued on its way.

“The whole night long they remained alone, both of them silent.

“When morning came, and they stopped at a German station, the stranger got out; then, standing at the door he said :

“ ‘Forgive me, Madame, for breaking my promise; but I have deprived you of your servant, it is right that I should replace him. Do you need anything?’

“She replied coldly :

“ ‘Go and fetch my maid.’

“He went about it. Then disappeared.

“When she got out at some refreshment-room, she would see him in the distance looking at her. They arrived at Menton.”

II

The doctor was silent for a second, and then went on :

“One day, when I was receiving my patients in my consulting-room, I saw a tall fellow come in who said to me :

“ ‘Doctor, I have come to ask you for news of Countess Marie Baranov. Although she doesn’t know me, I am a friend of her husband’s.’

“I replied :

“ ‘She is doomed. She will never go back to Russia.’

“And this man suddenly began to sob, then got up and went out, stumbling like a drunkard.

“I informed the Countess, that same evening, that a stranger had come to ask me about her health.

She seemed moved, and related to me the whole story I have just told you. She added :

“ This man, whom I do not know, follows me now like my shadow. I meet him every time I go out ; he looks at me in a strange manner, but he has never spoken to me. ”

“ She reflected, then added :

“ Look, I bet you he is beneath my window. ”

“ She left her couch, went to draw aside the curtains, and indeed showed me the man who had come to find me, sitting on a bench on the promenade, his eyes raised towards the hotel. He saw us, got up, and walked off, without once turning his head.

“ I then witnessed a surprising and sorrowful thing, the silent love of these two beings who did not know each other.

“ He loved her with the devotion of a rescued animal, grateful and devoted until death. He came every day and said to me : ‘ How is she ? ’ realising that I had guessed his secret. And he would weep dreadfully when he saw her pass by, weaker and paler every day.

“ She said to me :

“ I have only spoken once to this queer man, and it seems to me I have known him for twenty years. ”

“ And when they met each other, she would return his bow with a grave and charming smile. I felt she was happy, she who was so deserted and who knew she was dying. I felt she was happy to be loved thus, with this respect and this constancy, with this exaggerated poesy, this infinite devotion. And yet, faithful to her fanatical self-will, with a desperate effort she refused to receive him, to know

his name, to talk to him.

“She would say :

“No, no, that would spoil this strange friendship for me. We must remain strangers to one another.”

“As for him, he must likewise have been a kind of Don Quixote, for he did nothing to come nearer her. He wanted to keep, to the very end, the absurd promise never to talk, which he made in the railway-carriage.

“Often, during her long hours of weakness, she would get up from her couch and go and half open her curtains to see if he was there, under her window; and she would come back and lie down again with a smile on her lips.

“She died one morning, about ten o’clock. As I was leaving the hotel, he came up to me, agony written on his face; he already knew what had happened.

“I should like to see her for a second, with you,” he said.

“I took his arm and went back into the house.

“When he was by the dead woman’s bed, he seized her hand and kissed it with an endless kiss, then ran out of the room like a mad man.”

The doctor was silent again, and then continued :

“That must surely be the strangest train adventure I know. One must say, too, that men are crazy creatures.”

A woman murmured in a low voice :

“Those two beings were less mad than you think.—They were—they were—”

But she could say nothing more, she was crying so much. As the conversation was changed to calm her down, we never knew what she wanted to say.

THE MOTHER SAVAGE

To Georges Pouchet

I

I HAD not been back to Virelogne for fifteen years. I went there again to shoot with my friend Serval, who had at last had his château rebuilt, it having been destroyed by the Prussians.

I loved that country immensely. There are delightful little corners of the world which have, for the eyes, a sensual charm. One loves them with a physical love. We people whom the earth seduces, we preserve tender memories for certain oft-seen springs, woods, pools, and hills, which have moved us in the manner that happy events do. Sometimes even, one's thoughts go back to a tiny nook in the forest, or part of a bank, or an orchard sprinkled with flowers, seen just once, on a bright, cheerful day, and stamped on our hearts like those visions of women one meets in the street on a Spring morning, in bright, flimsy clothes, and who leave, in our minds and flesh, an unpeased and unforgettable desire, the sensation of elbowed-out happiness.

At Virelogne, I loved the whole countryside, dotted with little woods, and crossed by streams which ran through the earth like veins carrying blood to the soil. One would fish in them for crayfish, trout and eels. Divine happiness ! One could bathe in certain spots, and one would often find snipe in the tall grass that grew on the brink of

these slender streams.

I went along, light-footed as a goat, looking at my two dogs foraging in front of me. Several, a hundred yards to my right, was beating a field of clover. I was turning by the bushes which mark the boundary of the Des Saudres wood, when I saw the ruins of a cottage.

Suddenly I recalled it as I had seen it for the first time, in 1869, neat and tidy, covered with vines, chickens before the door. What is sadder than a dead house, with its skeleton standing, dilapidated and sinister?

I remembered, too, that a good woman had made me drink a glass of wine in that house, one tiring day, and that Serval had told me then the history of its occupants. The father, an old poacher, had been killed by the gendarmes. The son, whom I had seen before, was a tall, lean fellow, who was likewise reputed to be a terrific destroyer of game. They were called the Savages.

Was it a name or a nickname?

I hailed Serval. He came up, with his long wander's stride.

I asked him :

“What happened to the people from here?”

And he related to me this story.

II

When war was declared, the Savage son, who was then thirty-three, joined up, leaving his mother alone in the house. People did not pity the old woman overmuch, because she had money, it was known.

So she stayed all alone in this lonely house, so far from the village, on the edge of the wood. She was not afraid, however, being of the same stock as her men-folk, a vigorous old woman, tall and thin, who seldom laughed, and with whom one didn't joke. Besides, women of the fields rarely laugh. That is left to the men. They have gloomy restricted souls, leading a dismal life with no bright vistas. The peasant is taught a little noisy gaiety at the inn, but his companion remains serious with constantly stern features. The muscles of their face have not learnt the motions of laughter.

The mother Savage went on with her ordinary life in her cottage, which was soon covered by the snow. She went along to the village, once a week, to fetch her bread and a little meat; then she returned to her humble dwelling. As there was talk of wolves, she would go out with her gun on her back, her son's gun, rusted, and with the butt worn away by the friction of the hand; and she looked odd, the tall Savage woman, a little bent, walking with slow strides through the snow, the barrel of her weapon rising above the black bonnet fastened tightly round her head and imprisoning her white hair, which nobody had ever seen.

One day the Prussians arrived. They were distributed among the inhabitants, according to the wealth and resources of each. The old woman, who was known to be rich, had four of them.

They were four big fellows, light-skinned, fair-haired and blue-eyed, who had remained plump despite the hardship they had already endured, and were good-natured, even though they were in conquered country.

Alone with this elderly woman, they showed themselves full of consideration for her, sparing her, as much as they could, from fatigue and expense. They could be seen in the morning, all four of them, washing themselves at the well, in shirt sleeves, splashing their pink and white Northerners' skin with plenty of water, in the raw, snowy weather, whilst the mother Savage came and went, preparing the soup. Then they would be seen cleaning the kitchen, scrubbing the tiles, chopping wood, peeling the potatoes, washing clothes, carrying out the household tasks, like four good sons with their mother.

But she kept on thinking about her own son, the old woman, her tall, lean son with his hooked nose, his brown eyes and his thick moustache, which formed a cushion of black hair on his lip. Every day, she would ask each of the soldiers seated at her hearth :

“Do you know where the French regiment has gone, the twenty-third Foot? My boy is in it.”

They would reply in their broken French :

“No, don't know, don't know at all.”

And, understanding her suffering and anxiety, they who had mothers over there, themselves, they would render her a thousand little services. She was very fond of them, too, her four enemies; for peasants rarely have patriotic hatreds; that belongs only to the upper classes. Humble people, those who pay most because they are poor and any new burden weighs them down, those who are killed in large numbers, who make the real cannon-fodder, those who, in short, suffer the most cruelly from the horrid miseries of war, because they are the weakest and have the least resistance, rarely understand that belli-

cose fervour, that excitable pride and those so-called political alignments which, in six months, exhaust two nations, the victorious as much as the conquered.

In the district, when they spoke about the mother Savage's Germans, they would say :

“There are four who've found their home.”

Well, one morning, when the old woman was alone in the house, she saw, far off in the fields, a man coming towards her cottage. Soon she recognised him, it was the postman charged with distributing the letters for the village. He handed her a folded paper, and, from her case, she took out the spectacles she used for sewing ; then she read :

“MADAME SAVAGE, this is to give you sad news. Your boy Victor was killed yesterday by a cannon-ball, which practically cut him in two. I was quite near, as we were together in the company, and he told me about you and to let you know the same day if anything happened to him.

“I took his watch from his pocket to bring it back to you when the war is over.

“My friendly greetings,

“CESAIRE RIVOT,

“Soldier of the second class of the 23rd Foot.”

The letter was dated three weeks earlier.

She did not cry. She stood motionless, so shocked and so stupefied, that she didn't even feel anything yet. She thought : ‘Now Victor's been killed.’ Then gradually the tears came to her eyes, and grief invaded her heart. Thoughts came to her mind one after the other, terrible and torturing. She would not embrace her child any more, her tall lad, never

again ! The gendarmes had killed the father, the Prussians had killed the son . . . He had been cut in two by a cannon-ball. And it seemed to her that she could see it, the horrible scene : the head falling, the eyes open, while he gnawed the end of his moustache, as he did in moments of anger.

What had they done with his body afterwards ? If only they had brought her child back to her, as they had brought back her husband, with the bullet in the centre of his forehead.

But she heard the noise of voices. It was the Prussians, coming back from the village. Very quickly she hid the letter in her pocket and received them calmly, with her ordinary face, having had time to dry her eyes.

All four were laughing, delighted, for they had brought back a rabbit, stolen doubtless, and they signed to the old woman that they were going to eat something good.

She immediately set about the task of preparing the lunch ; but when the rabbit had to be killed, she lacked the heart . Yet it wasn't the first ! One of the soldiers struck it dead with a blow from his fist behind the ears.

Once the animal was dead, she took the red body out of the skin ; but the sight of the blood she was touching and which covered her hands, warm blood which she felt cooling and coagulating, made her tremble from head to foot ; and she kept on seeing her big boy cut in two, all red as well, like this still, quivering animal.

She sat down to table with the Prussians, but could not eat, not even a mouthful. They devoured the rabbit without troubling themselves about her.

She looked at them out of the corner of her eye without talking, ripening an idea, her features so impassible that they noticed nothing.

Suddenly she asked :

“I don’t even know your names and here we’ve been a month together.”

They understood, not without difficulty, what she wanted, and gave their names. That was not enough ; she had them written on a piece of paper, with the address of their families, and, putting her spectacles on her long nose, she contemplated this strange writing, then folded the sheet and put it into her pocket, on top of the letter which informed her of the death of her son.

When the meal was over, she said to the men :

“I’m going to do something for you.”

And she began to carry hay into the loft where they slept.

They were astonished at this labour ; she explained to them that they would be less cold, and they helped her. They heaped up bundles of hay as high as the straw roof ; and, in this way, they made a sort of big bedroom with four walls of fodder, warm and sweet-scented, where they would sleep marvellously.

At dinner one of them was worried to see that the mother Savage was still not eating. She declared that she had the cramps. Then she lit a good fire to warm herself, and the four Germans climbed up into their abode by the ladder they used every evening.

As soon as the trap-door was shut again, the old woman took away the ladder, then noiselessly opened the outside door, and went out again to bring bundles of straw with which she filled her kitchen. She went bare-foot, in the snow, so quietly that

nothing could be heard. From time to time she would listen to the sonorous and uneven snores of the four, sleeping soldiers.

When she considered her preparations sufficient, she threw one of the trusses into the fire-place, and, when it was in flames, she scattered it over the others, then went outside again and watched.

In a few seconds the whole of the inside of the cottage was lit up by a violent light, then it became a terrifying brazier, a gigantic, blazing oven, the light of which flashed through the narrow window and threw a dazzling beam on to the snow.

Then a great cry came from the top of the house, then there was a clamour of human shrieks, piercing screams of anguish and terror. Then, the trap-door having collapsed into the room below, a whirlwind of fire leapt into the loft, pierced through the straw roof, climbed into the sky like a huge torch flame; and the whole cottage blazed.

Nothing more was heard inside save the crackling of the fire, the cracking of the walls, and the crashing of the beams. The roof suddenly fell in, and the glowing carcass of the dwelling threw into the air, in the midst of a cloud of smoke, a great plume of sparks.

The country around, white, and lit up by the fire, shone like a sheet of silver tinted with red.

In the distance a bell began to ring.

The old Savage woman remained standing before her ruined house, armed with her gun, her son's, for fear one of the men escaped.

When she saw that it was over, she threw her weapon into the brazier. There was a report.

People arrived, peasants, Prussians.

They found the woman sitting on a tree-trunk, calm and satisfied.

A German officer, who spoke French like a son of France, asked her :

“Where are your soldiers?”

She extended her thin arm towards the red heap of the dying fire, and replied in a firm voice :

“In there!”

They pressed around her, and the Prussian asked :

“How did the fire start?”

She said :

“I began it.”

They did not believe her ; they thought the disaster had suddenly turned her mad. Then, as everyone surrounded her, and listened to her, she told the whole story from beginning to end, from the arrival of the letter to the last cry of the men blazing with her house. She did not omit a single detail of what she had felt, nor of what she had done.

When she had finished, she drew out from her pocket two papers, and, to distinguish them in the last glimmerings of the fire, she adjusted her spectacles again, then said, pointing to the one :

“This one, this is the death of Victor.”

Showing the other, she added, indicating the red ruins with a movement of her head :

“This is their names so that you can write to their families.”

She calmly handed over the white sheet to the officer, who was holding her by the shoulders, and she went on :

“You will write and say how it happened, and

you will tell their relatives that it was I who did it, Victoire Simon, the Savage. Don't forget."

The officer shouted some orders in German. She was seized and thrown against the still warm walls of her dwelling. Then twelve men quickly lined up facing her, twenty paces away. She did not stir. She had understood; she waited.

A command rang out, followed immediately by a long report. A belated shot went off by itself, after the others.

The old woman did not fall. She sank down as if her legs had been cut away.

The Prussian officer approached. She was almost cut in two, and, in her clenched hand, she held her letter, bathed in blood.

My friend Serval added :

"It was for reprisals that the Germans destroyed the château of the district, which belongs to me."

As for me, I was thinking of the mothers of the four nice lads burnt inside there; and of the dreadful heroism of this other mother, shot against this wall.

And I picked up a little stone, still blackened by the fire.

T H E E N D

